

FALSE CARDS



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FALSE CARDS.

CHAPTER I.

THE ALDRINGHAM BENCH.

This market-day in Aldringham. That thriving town, centre of a great agricultural district, is all alive. The well-to-do farmers of the neighbourhood pour in to see what may be stirring—to gossip, to cater, to hear whether wool may be still rising, or what change may have taken place in the price of corn. Genial and hearty are their greetings. Much badinage passes amongst them with regard to the week's doings in the hunting-field. Small holland bags are dragged from capacious pockets, and there is pouring of wheat from palm to palm, munching and muttering of “good !” “bold !” “bright !” &c., and “What may you be asking a quarter ?” Here a burly farmer inquires peevishly whether “owt like the price of sheep was ever heard on ?”—there another shakes his head, and mutters mysteriously, “Pigs are rum ’uns ; they’re down to nowt. You might as ’lieve give ’em away.”

At the fishmonger's the burly breeder of shorthorns and the country rector run across each other in pursuit of a bit of cod or a pair of soles for next day's dinner. The

gunsmith is driving a brisk trade, and it would seem that cartridges are quite as much in demand as corn; for be it known that Aldringham is the centre of a very sporting district, and most of these jolly agriculturists are equally at home in the saddle or with the trigger—can negotiate an awkward double, or render good account of a woodcock, with equal facility.

The barbers' shops are having a busy time of it; the bucolical chins of the small landholders poise themselves in mid-air, and offer the week's growth to the blade of the shearer, who lathers, mows, and mops with wondrous celerity and assiduity. The numerous booths about the spacious market-place are thronged with customers, while the vendors of quack medicines and the cheap-Jacks are respectively surrounded by attentive groups. One of these latter, indeed, has attracted a largish audience. It is a sharp November morning, and he proffers great-coats and other warm clothing to the public. He is a very gem of his kind, and keeps up an unceasing flow of patter, and a continual change of garment.

"All right, you don't go for ease afore ornament, you don't—a nobleman like you must put in for appearances—something spicy and fashionable, that's your line. I have got 'em here all sorts and sizes—coats for costermongers and paletots for members of Parliament. Here you are," he continued, turning himself round, that his audience might have a back view of him—"look at it on all sides, warmth, respectability, and comfort—that's wot it is—and all for twelve-and-six! It's clean giving it away, I am! Don't nobody speak?—there, take it for eleven shillings—what, you won't? Ah! it's fashion you want—better be dead than out of the fashion, says you, and right you are! Now, then," he continued, throwing off the coat which had been the subject of his late laudation, and slipping into a more slangy garment of the same kind, "this is the article to fetch you; there can't be no mistake about you now, you know. Look at me!—you'd be puzzled to make out whether I was a nobleman on his way to the races, or the county member going to a ploughing-match. Ease and elegance—that's wot it is. Who said seventeen-and-six? Take it at

fifteen, and I'll throw you an eye-glass in. Well, it's no use—I knows when I'm bound to sell. You were made for the coat, and the coat for you, sir. There, take it away at fourteen bob; it'll be profit enough only to see you walk about in it." And as he concluded, the speaker whipped off the subject of his encomium, and threw it to a soft-looking, flashily-dressed man, who formed one of his audience.

There was much grinning amongst the crowd, more especially when, after duly trying the coat on, the victim succumbed, and paid for it. Men of the vendor's profession have eyes like hawks, and are quick at the reading of faces. They know if they can once induce any one of their hearers to try on one of the garments they display, that the selling him one is very nearly certain and consequently often try a *coup* of this description.

But now the attention of the throng is arrested by a small procession of the county police, who are escorting some two or three delinquents to hear their doom before the bench of magistrates at this time assembled. The magistrate's office in Aldringham is quite one of the popular entertainments on a market-day. The country people, more especially the women, take their seats there, and watch the proceedings with grave, stolid faces, and an interest almost incredible. They regard it as a species of dramatic entertainment, with the additional advantage that it is perfectly gratuitous. And they have some reason for doing so. Touches of pathos and scenes of humour are at times evolved from the somewhat humdrum work of a magistrate's office, and by persistent attendance an occasional comedy or melodrama is arrived at.

There is considerable excitement to-day, as it is whispered about that a sharper, who has practised only too successfully on the credulity of the town and neighbourhood, is about to be arraigned, and confronted with his victims. Popular opinion is divided as to how things will go with him. While some contend that he has been so crafty in his duplicity that the law will prove powerless to touch him, others indignantly demand whether it was likely that the police would have inter-

ferred unless they had got a clear case? But that it will be a cause of much interest is allowed on all hands.

The body of the magistrate's office fills quickly. There is quite a buzz of conversation. Much laughter and giggling are called forth as it is whispered around how divers personages, well known to the crowd, have been taken in by the prisoner, and by what ingenious methods. Suddenly the inspector of police calls sternly for silence in the court, and the magistrates make their appearance, through the door of their private room.

A grim, grizzled, severe-looking man takes the chair, and throws a keen, harsh look over the thronged benches as he does so. It is Sir John Collingham, Chairman of the Aldringham Bench; a good man of business, but with little mercy for human infirmities in his hard, stern nature. One who holds that the peccant weaknesses of mankind are best held in check by sharp castigation at the outset; that heavy stripes meted out for first offending is the best remedy with which to counteract a tendency to wander a-down the flowery by-paths of vice. A just man, who will sift the evidence of crime with patience and impartiality; but who, once convinced that the accusation is true, is swift and vengeful in his judgment. He carries much the same principles into his dealings in private life, and hates and persecutes those with whom he has quarrelled with an unforgiving fervour most edifying to witness.

Next to him, on his right, is a tall, stout, pompous gentleman, who surveys the Court benignly through his double gold eye-glass. His patronizing smile seems calculated to assure lookers-on; it seems to say, "Pray be easy in your minds. *I* have taken the business in hand. Is not that enough?" And in his own heart Mr. Holbourne, the Aldringham banker, is most thoroughly convinced that it is. Mr. Holbourne is imbued with the belief that the whole prosperity of Aldringham is due to, and derived from, his residing and taking interest in the place. His name figures upon all committees for the promotion of either business or amusement. Mr. Holbourne attends them every one with praiseworthy diligence—hems, haws, applauds gently, and surveys the members

beningly through the double gold eye-glass. Although he has never been known either as the originator or active conductor of reforms sanitary, schemes commercial, designs theatrical, or designs terpsichorean, yet Mr. Holbourne is quite convinced that none of these things would ever have been achieved in Aldringham but for himself. The town, he considers, owes him a great debt of gratitude, and England generally may be thankful to possess so energetic a citizen—a prosperous, well-to-do man, thoroughly wrapped up in the sense of his own importance, and who has never yet met with a reverse sufficient to shake the pedestal of self-esteem from which he looks blandly down upon his less-gifted and less-fortunate fellow-creatures. Two other magistrates complete the Bench upon this occasion, of whom it will suffice to say that one is of a vacillating turn of mind, and is painfully swayed by conflicting evidence; while the fourth is a benevolent old clergyman, who seldom, from deafness, thoroughly comprehends the witnesses, and in his anxiety not to commit himself, generally leans to the merciful view of not committing the prisoner.

Silence having been again proclaimed, a fair-haired, quietly-dressed man is placed in the dock, and looks in nowise abashed by his situation. If truth must be told, it is not quite the first time that Mr. Leonidas Lightfoot has occupied that position in a Court of Justice. He has a pale face, with a comical snub-nose, and a pair of twinkling gray eyes. He makes a graceful obeisance to the Bench, and then lounges easily over the rail in front of him. He listens attentively while the magistrate's clerk reads out the indictment—"How that he, Leonidas Lightfoot, has obtained various sums of money from the tradespeople of Aldringham, and the neighbouring inhabitants thereof, under fraudulent pretences," and declares himself "Not Guilty," when called upon to plead, with an air of easy assurance.

"What is your occupation and place of residence?" inquired Sir John Collingham of the prisoner, as the clerk finished.

"A philanthropist," replied Mr. Lightfoot, quietly. "My object is the relief of the struggling and slightly-

educated working-classes. My residence, where I may find employment to my hand. The profession, as your worships of course see, necessitates much wandering from place to place." "Are you accredited to any mission or society for that purpose?" asked the chairman, sternly.

"No; I prosecute my work single-handed. To put ambitious youth in the way of a remunerative and honest livelihood, is the sole purpose of my existence."

"Upon my life," retorted Sir John, sharply, "it strikes me you are one of the most impudent fellows ever brought before me."

"To be persecuted and misunderstood, sir, has been ever the lot of advanced reformers," murmured the prisoner, sadly.

"I tell you what," whispered the chairman to Mr. Holbourne, "the police have either made a mistake, or we have got hold of a very clever impostor. I should think the latter."

"Quite so—quite so. I was just about to observe the same thing, Sir John." And Mr. Holbourne glanced indignantly through his eye-glasses, as much as to say that any attempt to take him in was a very hopeless affair indeed.

"He said he was a victim of persecution, did he not?" inquired the deaf clergyman.

"I am afraid the police have fallen into a grievous misconception," muttered the vacillating magistrate.

"Call the first witness," said Sir John.

A slouching young man was thereupon placed in the witness-box, and sworn. In answer to the questions put to him, it was elicited that he was a grocer's assistant in Aldringham; that attracted by an advertisement in the *Middlethorpe Gazette*, he had answered it, and had enclosed five shillings worth of stamps, according to the terms of such advertisement; that the advertiser stated that, in consideration of such sum, he would put him (the witness), if possessed of a capital of five pounds, in a business at which from thirty shillings to two pounds a week was easily made, and that he had not done so.

"You have heard what the witness has sworn," said the chairman. "Do you want to ask him any questions?"

"Only two, gentlemen," replied Mr. Lightfoot; "but, before I do so, I request that the advertisement alluded to may be read in court."

"Quite inadmissible—quite inadmissible; unparalleled presumption!" murmured Mr. Holbourne.

"I opine he has a perfect right to have it done now, if he demands it," replied the Baronet, with a smile. "I have a copy of the paper here; but the advertisement must be put in evidence some time, you know. The case, of course, may hinge pretty much upon the wording of it."

"Certainly, Sir John, certainly. If you choose to waive the irregularity of the proceeding, I withdraw my objection." And Mr. Holbourne threw himself back in his chair, with the air of a man who had yielded an assured point of law out of deference to his colleagues.

The clerk was accordingly desired to read the advertisement, which ran as follows:—

"TO THE AMBITIOUS AND INDIGENT. TO THE EDUCATED AND NEEDY OF BOTH SEXES.—The Advertiser has for years noticed that people of some slight education and small capital fail to raise their position in the world from two causes. Firstly, from not knowing in what direction to exercise their faculties; secondly, from ignorance of the numberless opportunities that exist in this great commercial country of profitably starting themselves in business for a few pounds. The Advertiser has made it his special study to investigate those tangled paths to fortune that lie open to the small but enterprising capitalist. Numberless testimonials from individuals now wealthy, will attest that they owed their first success in life to the Advertiser's advice. To the sons and daughters of Aldringham and its vicinity, the Advertiser has only now to say that he can place any one of them in the way of a light, genteel business, that realises from thirty shillings to two pounds a-week, and requires a capital of only five pounds to commence with. The trade is new, and will, of course, be speedily overcrowded, therefore early application is advisable. Enclose five shillings worth of stamps, as registry fee, and in proof of the genuineness of the application. Address, L. L., Post-office, Aldringham."

"You, of course, admit this advertisement to be yours?" inquired Sir John.

"Pardon me, I have been told that admission is always dangerous in a Court of Law," replied Mr. Lightfoot.

"We will say, if you please, that I received a letter from the witness, in consequence of that advertisement. I wish to ask him whether he expected more than to be told how, upon an outlay of five pounds, he could earn from thirty shillings to two pounds a-week?"

"You hear the prisoner's question," said Sir John. "Be good enough to answer it."

"Well, he's so far right—that's what I did expect; but then," continued the witness, with a puzzled expression, "I can't somehow manage what he told me to do."

"I suppose you have not the five pounds?" inquired Mr. Holbourne.

"Oh! yes, I've the five pounds right enough; but then there's getting a place to put up the machine in. He said it was all simple enough, and it isn't—that's what I mean, and he's got my five shillings."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said Mr. Lightfoot, suavely, "but if you would allow me to ask the witness my second question, I think you will see at once that his own want of energy is the sole cause of his discontent."

The chairman nodded assent.

"Please read to the Court the letter you received in reply to your application; or if you haven't it with you, state its contents."

"Oh! here's the letter, and anyone's welcome to it," said the witness, fumbling in his pockets. "There, perhaps you'd kindly read it, sir," he continued, pushing the paper across to the clerk of the court. "I'm not very good at pen work myself."

The clerk took it, and read as follows:—

"The variation of the weight of the body has been of late a subject of great interest to the advanced pathologists who hold that the germ of many of the distempers so inimical to life may be detected in the deviations of human gravity. To meet the requirements of the age, and enable mankind to, in some measure, keep an eye upon the decrease or increase of flesh, which may be the indication of severe disorder in the system, there has come rapidly into vogue the **WEIGHING-MACHINE**. These health-regulating engines may be procured for from five

to ten pounds, and from statistics carefully collected from inquiry at all the principal railway stations where they are in work, yield to their proprietors a return of from six to seven shillings a day. Need I say more?—buy a weighing-machine, and take the first step on the road to fortune.”

The court was convulsed. The bench, even to the deaf clergyman, could not restrain their laughter; the latter laughed, after a very prevalent cause of human hilarity, to wit, because all around him laughed. Mr. Lightfoot and the witness alone appeared unmoved. And yet this can be hardly said of the latter, for although he showed no sign of mirth, he was evidently perturbed and haunted with a dim consciousness that he was in some sort an object of ridicule to his fellows.

“Gentlemen,” said Mr. Lightfoot, when the laughter had subsided, “I contend that every statement in that letter is a fact; there is a weighing-machine at the station here—you can send to see if it is not so.”

“That’s where it is,” interrupted the victim; “that’s how’s he’s cheated me, your honours. There is a weighing-machine, and they *won’t have another.*”

Here the inspector of police interposed, and informed the magistrates that the prisoner’s statement was substantially true as regarded the profits of the business, and that the railway company had received no less than forty-three applications for leave to set up weighing-machines at Aldringham in the course of the last week; all the results of the prisoner’s circular, for which the applicants had paid their five shillings apiece.

“May I point out, gentlemen, that people are equally desirous of being weighed in other places as in Aldringham,” remarked Mr. Lightfoot, as the inspector finished his story. “I gave my clients an idea quite worth what they paid for it. I cannot pretend to find them energy to put it into practice.”

“I suppose,” said the chairman, turning to the clerk, “all the evidence is of a similar character.”

“Yes, Sir John, there are plenty more witnesses, but their evidence is merely a repetition of what yon have heard.”

"I think," said the chairman to his brother magistrates, "we had better consult about this case before we go any further with it. And the bench accordingly withdrew into their private room.

"A most remarkable case of fraud," said Mr. Holbourne, as the door closed.

"No doubt about that," said Sir John; "but I don't think we can do anything with him. He has just managed to keep clear of the law. He's a most impudent scamp; but, nevertheless, he has acted in accordance with the terms of his advertisement."

"Precisely—just so," observed Mr. Holbourne. "It was the very remark I was about to make, Sir John. Yes! we can do nothing with him."

Of course the deaf gentleman was in favour of an acquittal, and the vacillating one not likely to be in opposition to his three colleagues, so that their consultation was speedily over, and they returned into court.

Silence was again proclaimed, and then the chairman spoke.

"We have heard the evidence against you, Leonidas Lightfoot, together with your ingenious comments upon it. My brother magistrates and myself regret to say, that although we have not the slightest doubt of your being one of those vultures of society who live upon the credulity of their fellow-men, that we have no option but to discharge you. A long course of similar imposition has probably rendered you an adept in keeping just within the pale of the law."

"Persecution, gentlemen, has ever been the lot of——"

"Silence!" said Sir John sharply. "No more of your cant, sir. That you gain your living by fraudulent representations we have no moral doubt. We can only trust that your narrow escape to-day may deter you from such practices in this neighbourhood for the future. You are discharged."

The prisoner left the dock, but was apparently in no hurry to leave the court. He remained listening most attentively to the proceedings until the adjournment, when he lounged leisurely away at the heels of the police.

Mr. Lightfoot was a man of much forethought, and he had known the crowd attempt to rectify the miscarriage of justice before now, especially in delicate cases like his own.

"Very curious case indeed," said Mr. Holbourne, as he narrated the circumstances to a friend later in the day, "but I saw at once we couldn't touch him—clever scoundrel—and Collingham quite agreed with me. Man of great intelligence, Sir John."





CHAPTER II.

MARION LANGWORTHY.

THE banker occupied a large old-fashioned house that opened on to one of the quieter streets of Aldringham. One of those queer roomy old houses that one meets with occasionally in the country towns of England. The dining-room, though rather low in pitch, was large and panelled with oak. You descended two steps to it, which of course led strangers at times to make a much more hurried than graceful entrance. In short, you were always going up or down two or three steps, and even those affiliated to the mansion would have hardly ventured about it in the dark. It was full of quaint corners and odd passages—an old house, in short, that had been much built on to, without reference to architects. The successive proprietors of days gone by had apparently thrown out a room here and a couple there, with the assistance of an Aldringham bricklayer, as exigency and fancy dictated. The result of course being a rambling house, that possessed far more space than it was possible to utilize, and a speciality for drafts that it was impossible to control. At the back ran a large old-fashioned garden—one of those gardens rarely seen now-a-days—a creation of an age that dreamt not of “bedding out plants,” composed of untrimmed evergreens, wandering paths, rustic summer-houses, very unlike the neat heather-roofed

erections of the present, and garnished with all sorts of flowers, that one seldom comes across in these times. Stocks, cabbage roses, sweet peas, larkspur, pinks, honeysuckle, &c., grew there in wild profusion. One felt that earwigs, caterpillars, and other creeping things must also be wandering about those realms in equal profusion, and that to sit down in one of those rather mildewed arbours would certainly involve the horrible sensation of something crawling down the back of one's neck.

Underneath the windows of the drawing-room, things certainly wore a different aspect. There the taste of Mr. Holbourne's niece and daughter had been exercised. A trim croquet-lawn ran almost up to the walls, and was surrounded by gaily-dressed beds, the decking of which had been undertaken on the most approved principles of modern horticulture. But the time of croquet and flowers has departed—however gay that parterre may once have been, it looks but desolate now, with its banked-up beds. The hoops have been withdrawn from the sward, which is now disfigured with worm casts; the leaves come fluttering down, and there is no denying that the view from Mr. Holbourne's drawing-room is depressing this November day.

And so, to judge by her countenance, thinks apparently a young lady who, with her hands laced behind her, is looking moodily out at the prospect. She is not exactly pretty, and yet Marion Langworthy never lacks partners nor admirers when she mixes in society. We see her, perhaps, at her very worst, as she stares vacantly into the garden. Hair of that dead ashen *blonde*, light blue eyes, thin lips, a resolute, somewhat square chin, and very slightly marked eyebrows, hardly give one the idea of beauty—still less so when one sees the face in perfect repose, as one does at this moment; there is a hardness about the lines, if one may so express it, that is rather repellent. One could fancy this woman cruel and merciless on occasion. Of medium height and very neat figure, there is a careless grace in her present attitude, albeit the pose is one by no means calculated to display a woman to advantage. She taps with her foot impatiently on the floor, exposing a very well-turned ankle

as she does so. Miss Langworthy is quite aware that her extremities are her strong point, although it is more from habit than design that she allows a glimpse of her little foot on this occasion.

"I wonder whether Reginald means coming down for this ball next week? What should you think, Grace?" observes Miss Langworthy at last, without turning her head.

"Really, my dear Marion, if you don't know, how should I? Are you not the keeper of his heart, and sharer of his sorrows and aspirations? Brothers don't trouble sisters much with their confidence under such circumstances."

The speaker, a tall, handsome girl, was buried in the depths of a huge old-fashioned arm-chair, and broke off from the book she was absorbed in to answer her cousin's question.

"And Reginald don't trouble himself any more, as far as I am concerned, either," retorted Miss Langworthy, with some asperity, as she turned sharply round. "I don't expect him to be writing me quires of maudlin sentiment—that is not my disposition any more than it is his; I don't want him to tell me he loves me by every post; he has told me so once, and asked me to marry him, which should content any reasonable woman—but I do expect him to answer my letters."

Grace Holbourne stared. Her brother's engagement to Marion had long been a mystery to her. A more prosaic pair of lovers surely never existed, Grace thought. They were both young; her cousin was only twenty-two, her brother but a year older; and yet, from the calmness of their greeting, and their perfectly undemonstrative behaviour to each other, no one could have imagined that any feeling warmer than pure cousinship existed between them. Mr. Holbourne, indeed, was perfectly ignorant of their engagement, although it was now four years since they had plighted their troth.

"Well, it's rude of him, to say the least of it," said Grace, laughing; but Regi always was a woefully bad correspondent."

"He will have to find a more satisfactory excuse than

that," replied Miss Langworthy, "or else his next visit to Aldringham will prove far from pleasant to him."

It did occur to Grace that under those circumstances it would be at her brother's discretion as to how long he should stay, and still more so when he should return. But Miss Langworthy had much confidence in her own attractions, and considerable faith in the sway she held over her lover, and Grace's view of the case never presented itself to her mind.

Although the foregoing conversation would lead to the belief that Marion was a girl who could not exercise much influence over men, such was far from being the case. If she was not pretty, she was, at all events, nice-looking. When her face was lit up and animated, she had more than once been pronounced fair to gaze upon. She had plenty to say for herself, was always dressed in extremely good taste, danced well, and was gifted with great self-possession. She had wonderful tact in drawing people out, in making them show the very best of themselves. She was a most thorough coquette, and a perfect mistress of all the rules of the science. No girl made more of such weapons as lay within her reach than did Marion Langworthy. No girl, perhaps, was ever more cold-blooded in the use of them. Her feelings were thoroughly well-tutored, and though, even as an engaged young lady, she manifested not the slightest objection to embark in any amount of flirtation, yet her *fiancé* might have rested perfectly easy upon that score.

Her engagement with Reginald Holbourne had happened in this wise. Four years previously Miss Langworthy had come upon a visit to her uncle at Aldringham. Reginald was home from Oxford, and only too delighted to become the esquire of his lively cousin. His devotion amused her, and she led him on with sweetest smiles, and other *agaceries*, until he got really infatuated about her. Miss Langworthy at that time lacked the experience she at present possessed. She was, moreover, carried away in some measure by the passion she had simulated. Although not really in love with her cousin, yet this flirtation had become so sweet to her that when, one night, the tide of feeling overflowed its banks, and Regi-

nald told his love with boyish eagerness, and asked her to be his, Miss Langworthy lost her head and assented. Reflection came upon the morrow, and then Marion admitted to herself that this was by no means the match she aspired to. But the taking back her plighted troth of the night before was hardly feasible, and, moreover, she could not quite make up her mind to dispel so soon the sunny dream that she was wrapped in. Her feelings were to some extent interested. In fact, she was about as nearly in love as women of Marion's type ever fall. She insisted that their engagement should be kept a secret for the present, most thoroughly enjoyed the remainder of her visit, and left Aldringham Reginald Holbourne's promised bride.

At this time Miss Langworthy was the only child of a merchant reputed wealthy. Her father kept a very good house, and entertained largely, in the town of Hull. Marion was looked upon as a catch, a girl who at her father's death would inherit many thousands, and she was not at all the young lady to overlook this fact in her matrimonial calculations. Miss Langworthy aspired to position. She wished to marry into the county families. As for her engagement to her cousin, that was, of course, all nonsense. It was rather nice getting those passionate, boyish letters at present, but, of course, all that would have to be put a stop to whenever anything eligible should turn up. "In the meantime it is very pleasant, and good for him too, poor boy," thought Miss Langworthy. "It keeps him out of mischief!" And with this salve to her conscience, Marion still adhered to her troth.

But an epidemic swept the town of Hull, and amongst those stricken were Marion's parents. She nursed them with exemplary patience and assiduity, but their *kismet* was written, and neither their daughter's care nor attention could turn the destroyer from his course. Never had Marion shown higher qualities than she did at this crisis of her life. She was a devoted nurse. Help, of course, she was obliged to call in; but as far as her strength lay, she permitted no one to usurp her place. Cool, calm, and with steady nerves, the doctors freely admitted her value in the sick-room. When urged to

spare herself in some measure, she answered, "I am strong—I husband my strength carefully, because I know I shall want it all. But while it lasts my duty is to my parents." When all was over, she, as might have been expected, to some extent broke down herself. She was ill for some weeks, and then her uncle Holbourne took her back to Aldringham for change of air.

On looking into the affairs of the deceased Mr. Langworthy, it was found that his estate would not very much more than cover his liabilities. That Marion, far from being an heiress, was the inheritor of not quite two thousand pounds. To a girl with Marion's ambition, this change in her worldly position was a bitter disappointment. But one thing appeared clear to her mind—to wit, that there must be no doubt about her engagement with her cousin now.

She had been at Aldringham some three weeks, and was sitting very pale and sad in her black draperies one afternoon, when, without any warning, her lover stood suddenly before her. Her nerves had been rather shaken by her illness, and the sad events that had preceded it. She could not refrain from a slight cry, and hysterical symptoms of agitation, at his abrupt appearance. No *finesse* she could have used would have answered her purpose so well. Nature interposed, and played her *rôle* for her. In an instant Reginald Holbourne's arm was round her, and his kisses fell warm upon her cheek.

"My darling Marion," he said, "I have been so grieved at all your trouble, so wretched because I was unable to console you in your affliction. It has been bitter anguish to me, dearest, that I might not share this sorrow with you. But you insisted that our engagement should be kept a secret, and so I could not assert my claim to be with you in your agony."

Little given was Marion Langworthy to tears or uncontrolled emotion, but she was sobbing on her lover's breast in veritable earnest now. At last she raised her head, and looking up at him through her tears, said softly,

"And I was right, Reginald; nobody knows anything about it now but our two selves. We shall have no

awkward explanations to give to any one. We must learn to forget the past, dearest, and look upon it as a pleasant dream of what might have been."

"Good Heavens! Marion, what can you mean?"

"Mean," she returned sadly, with her clasped hands resting on his shoulder—"that I restore you your troth—that all must be over between us—that henceforth we must be cousins to each other, and nothing more."

"And why? What have I done? If you no longer loved me, you would hardly speak to me as you do now!" exclaimed her lover, passionately.

"Sit down here, Reginald, and listen to me. I may be younger than you according to actual years, but a girl of nineteen is much older than a man of twenty. When I promised myself to you, I believed I should be rich—that I should not come to you empty-handed. All that is changed—I have next to nothing now—I am an absolute pauper."

"My dearest," replied Reginald, in deep, earnest tones, "you don't suppose I thought of your money when I asked you to marry me, do you?"

"No; it would be a sad moment for me indeed had I cause to think I had given my heart to one who had wooed me on that account. I think," she said, tearfully, "I know you better than that. Hush!—don't interrupt me," and Marion put her hand on his impatient lips. "But," she continued, "you have your way to make in the world. Do you think that I would be the drag upon you that I must now necessarily become? All must be over between us. You will soon, in the work that your career entails on you, forget this episode of your life. For me—well, it will not come quite so easy. We poor women, you see, have nothing to take us out of ourselves, as you have; but I also in time shall perhaps teach myself to forget what has passed."

To Reginald Holbourne, still passionately in love, what doubt could there be that his betrothed was noblest among women? He protested against her decision; he vowed that, if he had no longer the hope of calling her his to look forward to, that it mattered little what became of him—that the beacon of his life was extinguished

—that he had henceforth no object to work for; and at last Marion yielded to his entreaties, smiled up in his face, and told him that he was a foolish boy; but that, if he really cared enough about her to take a pennyless bride, she had no longer strength of mind to say him nay.

"It's wrong, Reginald, I know, but I am weak and shaken by my illness, or I think I should have had the courage to decide differently; but I have lost so much lately"—and here Marion's voice faltered—"that I haven't courage to throw away the sole thing left me—your affection. You will never upbraid me for this decision, will you? Think again, and if you have a doubt——"

But here Reginald stopped all further argument by folding her in his arms, and, as he expressed it, kissing away her scepticism.

"Now let me go, Regi. You have made me very happy, and I want to be alone, and think. Our engagement had best continue a secret for the present, recollect. It looks afar off, but we are young, and I believe in you,"—with which Miss Langworthy slipped from her lover's embrace, and left the room.

It is now some three years ago since this scene was enacted in the banker's drawing-room at Aldringham—since Reginald Holbourne rushed from the house in tumultuous ecstasy, to sober himself with a long stretch over the surrounding down country—since Miss Langworthy, after gazing for some time into the fire in the quiet seclusion of her own chamber, murmured—

"Yes, I have rivetted his fetters, at all events. He must wear my chains now, till it should either suit me to release him, or till we are bound to each other for life."

Mr. Holbourne was a widower—his daughter a girl at school when Marion took up her abode under his roof. At first her gentleness and anxiety to keep herself in the background were quite distressing to her uncle. She positively declined to become the mistress of the house, and the servants were full of encomiums and pity for the poor broken-spirited young lady, who had undergone so much trouble and misfortune; but before six months were over, the domestics became conscious of the work-

ing of an occult influence in the house that rather puzzled them; and it was not long before, at a prolonged session in the servants' hall, it was generally voted that the quiet, broken-spirited young lady was the primary cause thereof.

"Yes, Mrs. Meadows," said the butler one evening, "I have been here six years, and I received warning to-day. Master says he's generally dissatisfied, and found fault with half a score of things he never took notice of before. I say nothing, ma'am, but your turn will come next; and mark me, Miss Langworthy's at the bottom of it."

"I don't know what to think," replied the house-keeper. "She rarely finds fault with anything, and never, to do her justice, without cause, and she's as quiet and mild-spoken a young lady as needs be; but there's no denying master's changed since she came."

"Of course he is! She can twist him round her little finger; and if she don't say nothing to us she does to him. I've watched her of late, and just got to know a certain look of hers when things don't go to her liking. When I see that, I know it'll be unpleasant for some one before twenty-four hours are over."

The butler was perfectly right. Before another three months had elapsed Mrs. Meadows had also received her *congé*, and by the end of the year Marion was thoroughly established as mistress of her uncle's house. She speedily acquired great influence over him. The banker's grandiose manner imposed not a whit upon his sharp-witted niece; she thoroughly read the weak, vain character that lay underneath the pompous, patronizing manner. The keynote to the man's character was his inordinate vanity, and Marion played upon it as easily and brilliantly as an experienced musician does upon the instrument that he most favours.





CHAPTER III.

FAST FRIENDS.



DULL November day in London—one of those days that have a suspicion of rain about them—a dubious, misty day. Much uncertainty evident in the mind of the public as to whether an umbrella should be unfurled or not, and the advocates of either policy bearing about equal proportions. Ladies trot about rather high-kilted; men who have passed the age of appearances turn up their trousers and stride through the mud; fatuous youth, clinging to patent-leathers till the first snow, gazes helplessly and imbecilely at the sea of mud that lies between the kerb-stones, and recoils appalled from the crossings, which present an appearance but a few shades better. More advanced swell-dom betakes itself to cabs, and utterly declines to place a boot upon the greasy pavement. A kind of day that an umbrella-maker might exult in, always excepting that cynical member of the guild mentioned in Lacon, who, even in such prosperous times, was haunted with the idea “that there was nothing doing in parasols.”

Miss Langworthy at Aldringham, gazing gloomily out at the weather, and speculating upon the advent of her *fiancé* for the ball, has her prototype in London.

Staring vacantly out of a first floor in Baker Street, puffing savagely at a short pipe, his hands buried in his pockets, stands Reginald Holbourne, a tall, good-looking,

fair-haired young man, whose countenance at the present moment betokens vacillation and uncertainty.

"What beastly weather!" he mutters. "It's all bosh! —I can't go down to Aldringham. The ball, too, is a regular humdrum affair, and Marion will get on well enough without me. We have been engaged so long now," he muses, with a bitter smile, "that we are quite like an old married couple, regarding the easy way in which we take things. We've done with our raptures and embraces some time back, and our kiss is no more emotional than if we were brother and sister."

Baker Street is not a fashionable neighbourhood, but it is highly respectable, and much affected by people with limited means. It has its advantages. You are close to the Regent's Park, if you desire fresh air; undue exhilaration of spirits can always be kept in subjection by a visit to Madame Tussaud's; a turn round the Baker Street Bazaar is calculated to produce serious reflection, and also, when finances are straitened, to give an idea of the possession of wealth, as one contemplates the numberless articles that one might become the possessor of for a shilling. You feel more respect for the shillings in your pocket as you leave it and meditate upon how many things were within your compass had you chosen to have been extravagant. Besides, it is close to the underground railway, and when your business takes you daily to the City, that is a consideration. Now, Reginald Holbourne was at present in a large financial house in the neighbourhood of Cannon Street, and this last advantage had principally decided him upon taking up his abode in this locality.

Still gazing out of the window, still undecided about whether he shall go to Aldringham or not, still muttering disparaging remarks on the weather and emitting heavy clouds of smoke from under his moustache, he is suddenly roused from his musing by the quick rattle of a hansom, which pulls up with a jerk at his door. Throwing up the window, he cranes out to see who the new-comer may be, but is only in time to see a man dash across the pavement; a proceeding followed by a heavy peal on the bell. A few seconds' delay, a quick step on

the stairs, a sharp authoritative knock, and his door is thrown open, and a slight, dark man, some two or three years older than himself, enters tumultuously.

"Halloa! Regi," exclaims the new-comer; "all in the downs? How are you? I haven't seen you this long while—but we've no time to spare. Throw some things into a portmanteau, and come away to Aldringham. Aldringham—bless it!—is about to be festive! Aldringham, relieved from its normal dullness, I pine to see. Aldringham is going to dance; and heaven forfend that I should not endeavour to support Aldringham in such wild revelry!"

"You go to Aldringham?" exclaimed Holbourne, with open-eyed astonishment.

"Why not? My respected progenitor, as all Aldringham are doubtless aware, has duly cursed and discarded me; but 'a man's a man for a' that.' I don't suppose it will be much shock to Sir John—slight disappointment, perhaps—to see that I have still decent clothes to my back. But, although I have no wish to intrude upon my affectionate father, a public assembly is public ground, and if he can't breathe the same air as his son for two or three hours, he can order his carriage—I shall dance my gayest, whatever betide. But there's no time to be lost—look alive, and bundle up your traps!"

Reckless Charlie Collingham had turned the scale, and within an hour the two friends were speeding through the darkness on their way to Aldringham.

What had been the cause of such a bitter quarrel between Sir John and his younger son, had been a subject that, five years ago, had perplexed the Aldringham neighbourhood terribly. Wild, Charlie Collingham had always been, and little amenable to authority from his youth upwards; but there had never been rumour of misdemeanour so heinous as to warrant the extreme step his father had at last taken regarding him. He had cast him off utterly, and forbidden him his house. The two kept their own counsel, and the neighbourhood was no wiser than it was upon the first discovery of the rupture.

How Charlie Collingham lived was a mystery to most of his former acquaintances; but then there was no gain.

saying that something or somebody had waxed propitious, and provided him with ways and means. You saw him about town constantly, always well-dressed, and with an easy smile on his countenance. Now strolling in the park, now assisting at a "first night"—now at Lady Dumdrum's crush. You ran against him in club smoking-rooms, at the Royal Academy, at Greenwich dinners of the theatrical type. He had been seen at a Communist meeting on Clerkenwell Green on the Sunday, and noticed on a drag at Hampton on the Cup-day in the same week. Everybody seemed to know him; and he seemed, moreover, to be on familiar terms with a large circle of mysterious acquaintances, whose pursuits or status were not understood of society.

Conversation which had been brisk enough at starting, had died out between them, and the two young men smoked on in silence. Suddenly Collingham asked, abruptly: "Do you ever see anything of my brother down there?"

"Well, not a great deal. We see him occasionally; but I don't think he affects Aldringham much."

"He'll be there to-night, I suppose?"

"Yes, I should think so. You and he don't hit it off very well—do you?"

"Pooh! my dear fellow, a younger son never quite gets on with the heir to the property; but Robert and I don't pull amiss. We haven't met for over three years, and we never write, so that we must be on tolerable terms."

"One way of looking at it," laughed Holbourne; "but you might make the same observations relative to your father."

"Hold your tongue, Reginald," said the other curtly, "and don't talk about what you don't understand. That has passed between me and my father that is not likely to be soon expunged from our memories. I can only say, if it all had to be done again, I should act in the same way."

How far Charlie Collingham is justified in this assertion, we shall see further on, when the history of that quarrel comes to be related. As a rule, we are more apt

to take up the opposite line of argument—to whimper over our mistakes in life, to make moan over our past iniquities, and vow that if our time could come over again we would act with more judgment, and steel ourselves against temptation. And yet we constantly see that the stripes dealt out to us carry but little influence—that our punishment once endured, the atonement once made, we are little wiser, and not a whit the better for the infliction. We shriek forth promises of amendment when our sin finds us out; but the consequences once overcome, we are ready to commit ourselves once more. I never myself can withhold a certain amount of admiration for those who honestly own that they should probably fall again under similar temptation. There is much to be said in praise of the blunt truthfulness of the semi-sober sailor who was leaving Portsdown Fair at the expiration of his three days' revel. His leave was up, and sadly and sorrowfully he was making his way back to his ship lying at Spithead. The dire effects of copious libations racked his miserable brain. On his road an ass confronted him and brayed. He stopped, stared, scratched his poll, and again the ass gave vent to a hideous heehaw.

"Well, I'm blessed!" exclaimed this impenitent sinner, "*but if you had my head and I had your voice, I'd go back to the fair.*"

It is not often that we have the honesty to acknowledge that, as Rochefoucault puts it, "our vices have left us, and not we them."

But by this our travellers here reached Aldringham, and are now seeking their portmanteaus at the luggage van.

"Too late for you to go home, Reginald. You had better come up to the 'George' and have some dinner with me. Dress there, and accompany your people back afterwards."

"Yes, I think that will be best—come along."

The "George" is naturally in a simmer of excitement, in the flood-tide of business; not only does the "George" furnish the supper upon this occasion, but divers wandering bachelors, who have failed to procure

more favourable billets, have taken refuge at that hostelry. The young lady in extensive silk and chignon, who officiates behind the bar, is inclined to believe in much difficulty concerning a bed-room. Charlie takes the thing out of her hands in the airiest manner possible.

"Pray don't trouble yourself; just let Eliza, the head-chambermaid, know that Mr. Charles Collingham *must* have a bed-room, and I shall find one right enough, let who will go without."

In the coffee-room things wore a different aspect. Both the young men were well known to the head-waiter, and immediately commanded his special care and attention. Two or three of the diners there recognised Collingham, and came across to speak to him; he had been very popular in the country before his rupture with his father, but since that he had never been seen in Aldringham till to-night. His re-appearance naturally gives rise to much talk and conjecture. Mr. Withers, the landlord, has confidentially informed some half score or so of intimates that "it's all right again, you know, between Mr. Charles and Sir John. He's come down a-purpose to this ball, so that the neighbourhood may see they're friends again."

Perhaps no one was more lost in speculation on the subject than Reginald Holbourne. While Charlie was laughing and chatting with old friends after dinner, Reginald sat sipping his claret, and turning the thing over and over in his mind. That no reconciliation had taken place between father and son, Collingham's speech in the train was warranty for. Then what, after so long an absence, could bring him to Aldringham? In the hurry of their journey this had not occurred to him so forcibly as it did now. But the subject of these reflections suddenly touches him on the shoulder, and exclaims,

"Come along and dress, old man. It's time to get our dress toggery on. It's to be a big ball, they tell me."

Reginald's thoughts, as he leisurely arrayed himself, were by no means those of a young man preparing for a ball at which he is to meet the lady of his love. Sad to

say, during the last year Reginald has had a dim mis-giving that his engagement to his cousin is a mistake. He blames himself severely on the subject, and still thoroughly declines to admit that he is not strongly attached to her. He tries hard to cheat himself into the belief that his love is merely sobered down, as is invariably the case in a long engagement—that ardent passion has subsided into a holier flame, that of love based upon trust and esteem. And yet an undefined feeling of uneasiness comes over him ever and anon, which Reginald strives manfully to put away. It is very odd; times were when his pen ran fluent enough, and he covered sheets whenever he sat himself down to hold commune with Marion. Now writing to her is an effort, and he has to cast about much for something to say. He is sometimes sadly aware of a want of warmth in these epistles as he glances over them. He is seized with fits of penitence on such occasions, tears them up, and writes others, which, if they are no warmer, are, at all events, more plentifully sprinkled with terms of endearment. He is stricken, at times, with remorse for shortcoming in correspondence.

Direst composition that humanity ever pens are these mock love-letters. No sadder task than to have to work the bellows to keep the embers of an expiring passion alive. “No disguise can long *conceal* love where it is, nor *feign* it where it is not!” saith the French philosopher. Reginald, at the present, is struggling hard to perform all this to her to whom his troth is plighted. That he won Marion’s love as an heiress seems to him an insuperable bar to any change in their relations, now that she is no longer such. Reginald is a man of high feeling and principle, and would hold the man of small account who could abandon his betrothed because fortune had dealt hardly with her. It was all the more reason, in his eyes, that he should be bound by his engagement. Nobody was more aware of Reginald’s sentiments on such points than Marion Langworthy, and, selfish schemer as she was, it at times touched her. But then, despite her vanity,—and Marion had a great deal of vanity in her composition,—her astute woman’s wit had already fathomed that he

no longer loved her. Little as she really cared about him, resolved as she was to throw him over, should a better *parti* present himself, yet she secretly resented this defalcation on his part.





CHAPTER IV

THE ALDRINGHAM BALL.

THE fiddles are tuning, and trying little crescendo passages, without reference to each other. The gentlemen's cloak-room begins to fill. The younger men loiter there a good deal, and indulge in much *badinage* while they struggle painfully with their gloves. Those who have trusted to the Aldringham shops are dumbfounded as buttons fly off, and warranted best Parisian kids split woefully in the putting on. From the ladies' cloak-room opposite comes also a slight murmur of distress—requests for pins, lamentations over crushed flounces, and pathetic appeals "to shake me out, there's a dear." There are pains and penalties incidental to all revelling, and the Arcadian simplicity of the country ball is attended with its share of aches and heart-burnings. Miss Jones is struck with consternation at finding that Miss Smith's wreath is the fac-simile of her own, although she sent to London for it; Miss Brown has become aware that wherever she may take refuge, it must be far removed from Miss Johnson, whose more delicate shade of blue completely kills her (Miss Brown's) dress. These are the mere preliminary disappointments, destined to be eclipsed by more acute jealousies and bitterness as the evening wears on.

The room begins to fill; the people who arrived early emerge from the distant corners in which they have

vainly striven to hide themselves, and mix with the later comers. The knot of young men round the entrance door perceptibly increases; the aristocracy gather round the upper fire-place. Sir John Collingham, and his eldest son, Mr. Robert, are there—the Baronet grimly civil, after his wont; his son heavily, very heavily genial after *his* manner. A somewhat ponderous young man, whose “talk is of bullocks.” He dilates upon turnips and pheasants with equal facility; but should the conversation turn upon other subjects than shooting or farming, he relapses into silence. A ball-room is no “fool’s paradise” to him; but he recognises the fact that the Collinghams have duties to perform, and attends the Aldringham ball just as he would attend an agricultural dinner—on principle. He will go through divers quadrilles, and the after-supper country dance, from the same high motives, and be particular about asking all the ladies whom he may deem entitled to that courtesy at his hands. He looks upon the country as on the high road to anarchy and revolution, and that it behoves the aristocracy to make an effort to stem the tide, and, according to his lights, he is doing his best in that direction. He would sacrifice his personal comfort and valse, but has a somewhat undefined idea that ladies rather fight shy of him as a partner in that exercise, consequently he confines himself to shambling through quadrilles, and losing himself in the Lancers.

And now Mr. Holbourne elbows his way up the room, with his niece on one arm, and his daughter on the other. If Miss Langworthy be not a beauty, she at all events looks very well to night. Men follow her footsteps, and supplicate that their names may be inscribed upon her card; and she, fully equal to the occasion, laughs, smiles, and coquettes with them all. Grace Holbourne, too, has plenty of admirers—a handsome girl of eighteen, and sole daughter of the wealthy banker, it would have been strange had she not; but she manifests little inclination to engage herself deeply, and when hardly pressed, declares that she is “not very strong, and has no intention of dancing much this evening.”

This last observation happening to reach Miss Lang-

worthy's ears, Marion raised her eyebrows, and cast a mute glance of interrogation at her cousin; but Grace quietly lifted her boquet to her lips, and resolutely refused to recognise the telegraph.

Mr. Holbourne, having saluted Sir John, plants his portly figure upon the hearth-rug, and surveys the Aldringham world benignly through his double gold eye glass. As he stands there, exposing a vast expanse of white waistcoat to view, and greeting them with an urbane smile, he says, as clearly as if he had spoken it out loud—"Enjoy yourselves, my good people. I have had some little trouble in getting all this up for you, but, bless you! I don't mind the labour, only oblige me by enjoying yourselves!" And then he turns and extends a couple of fingers to some acquaintance, and gracefully dropping his eye-glass, inquires *sauvemy* after his wife and daughters. He does all this, too, with such apparent belief that his mere solicitude on the subject of their health must be of tangible benefit to those inquired after, and of extreme gratification to the person to whom such inquiry is addressed. Occasionally he beats time softly to the music, and turning to the nearest bystander, observes,—“Pretty, isn't it? I made Mackinder, the bandmaster, send to London for those.”

“What, not dancing, Grace?” suddenly observes Sir John. “Are the young men of these parts blind, or how comes it that the belle of Aldringham is standing out? I consider it a personal affront that my pretty god-daughter is not besieged by admirers.”

“Not quite so bad as that comes to, Sir John,” replied the girl, with a saucy toss of her head. “I have had plenty of chances, but I never like dancing much at the beginning of a ball—the finish is so much the best, you know. I mean to valse immensely by-and-by.”

“You are wrong, child,” laughed the Baronet—“at all events, more prudent than the girls of my day were. They were wont to dance a ball all out, from post to finish. Not such cool, calculating damsels as you are, Grace.”

“You will see me dance fast enough presently, Sir John,” retorted Miss Holbourne, with a little nervous laugh.

"Well, I hope so, or I shall have to ask you myself," replied the Baronet, smiling. "Now you know the penalty of standing still, I fancy I shall soon see you exert yourself."

Miss Langworthy was too much absorbed in her own devices to notice her cousin, or else the latter's slightly nervous manner and somewhat wandering glances would scarcely have escaped her keen eyes; but at this present moment she was seated in a remote corner of the room, exercising all the artillery of her fascination on a young Oxonian, who was succumbing in a way most derogatory to the precocious youth of our generation.

It was at this juncture that Reginald Holbourne and young Collingham entered the ball-room, and made their way leisurely up it. Much astonishment was created by the appearance of the latter, and several people stopped to shake hands and interchange a few words with him. Some of the elders were burning with curiosity to see the meeting between father and son. He has got very near to the top of the room, but as yet the magnates there have not discovered him. One pair of eyes, it is true, marked his entrance, but they have been turned carefully in another direction ever since. Suddenly he is confronted by his half-brother, Robert.

"Do you know your father is here, Charles?" inquires Robert Collingham.

"No," was the unembarrassed reply; "but as we don't speak, it can't much matter to either of us."

"But consider what the public will think of such a state of things. Surely you will withdraw?" urged Robert, who had much reverence and esteem for the proprieties of this world.

"Most assuredly I shall not; the public is welcome to think anything it pleases, and you and Sir John are perfectly at liberty to explain the affair in any way that seemeth good to you. I have come to enjoy my ball, and intend to do so, even should every one of my ancestors glower at me throughout the evening;" and with that Charlie brushed past his brother, and made his way to where Mr. Holbourne was standing.

Sir John could not refrain from a slight change of

countenance when he suddenly perceived his discarded son within half a dozen steps of him. It was but momentary, and then his face hardened to granite, and he returned Charlie's low bow with a fixed icy stare of oblivion as to his very personality. The young man passed quietly on, and holding out his hand, exclaimed,

"How d'ye do, Mr. Holbourne?"

The banker was rather taken aback. He had an idea that there was something awkward in recognising Charlie Collingham in the presence of Sir John, but still it was impossible for him to refuse to do so. You can't cut a man merely because he has quarrelled with his father. So Mr. Holbourne extended two fingers, after his usual manner, and hoped he saw Mr. Collingham well.

"Perfectly so, thank you," replied Charlie, as his eyes twinkled. "Sorry to see your old enemy the gout has got hold of you."

"Gout! Pooh! nonsense!—I never have the gout. What put that in your head!" cried Mr. Holbourne, swelling with indignation.

Like most men who have made acquaintance with the premonitory symptoms, the banker was very sensitive to any imputation that he was ever a sufferer from that complaint.

"Beg pardon," said Charlie, with a wicked flash of his dark eyes. "I thought you were afraid to shake hands, that was all;" and in another second he was exchanging greetings with Miss Holbourne.

"You have kept me a dance or two, I hope?" he said, in a low tone.

"You can have the next," replied Grace, as her face flushed slightly.

"Thanks; this is just over. Let me take you to get some tea?"

Miss Holbourne slipped her hand under his arm in reply, and the pair was soon lost in the throng.

Tiddle-de-um-de-dum-de-de, tiddle-de-um-de-di-do, go the fiddles, and all the room is whirling round to the inspiring strains of "Skid na ma link." Circled by Charlie Collingham's arm, with sparkling eyes and animated face, Grace swings smoothly past her cousin, who

mutely wonders with whom it is she is dancing ; for the rupture with Sir John and his son had taken place before Miss Langworthy's first visit to Aldringham, and his face was consequently unknown to Marion. She is dancing with Reginald upon this occasion, and appeals to him for information.

"That ?—oh ! that's 'The Disinherited,'" laughed young Holbourne. "Haven't you ever seen him before ? We came down together."

"I don't understand you," replied Marion.

"Well, it's Charlie Collingham, and his father cut him here dead to-night."

"How foolish of Grace ! She ought to keep clear of such a complication," said Miss Langworthy.

"Why, good heavens ! she's known him all her life. Why shouldn't she dance with him ! He's done nothing to be ashamed of."

"You don't understand these things, Reginald. Why didn't you answer my letter, sir ?—and how long are you going to stop ?"

"I must go back to-morrow—I can't help it."

"Always the same. I see next to nothing of you now," pouted Marion. "There, never mind," she continued hurriedly, seeing that he was about to expostulate. "I'm not going to scold or quarrel. I suppose it must be so ; and I won't be unreasonable. Let's have a galope now, Reginald ; I must make the most of you during the short time I have you here." And Marion smiled fondly up in his face."

It was at moments like these that Reginald Holbourne was wont to be seized with twinges of conscience, and feel angry with himself at the way in which his love for his cousin had so unaccountably died away. Manfully as he strove to shut his eyes to the fact, he could not altogether conceal it from himself. When she upbraided him or quarrelled with him—and she often did both—he felt sadly that it would be perhaps better if all were over between them ; but when she was all softness and affection, as it pleased her to be this evening, he blamed himself for the half-hearted return he was making for the love that he had won.

He was a good way off understanding Marion Langworthy as yet.

But the music has ceased, and people crowd down to supper—to devour tough chicken and ill-cooked ham, to imbibe tepid Marsala and sweet Champagne—to sit upon narrow benches and straight-backed chairs, to struggle for clean plates and cry piteously for clean glasses; to enjoy, in short, all the tumultuous revelry of a country-ball supper. Stay, there is a couple sitting in a quiet corner of the ball-room who seem above such earthly enjoyment. From their close propinquity and earnest conversation, I think the most casual observer would have pronounced them rehearsing the old, old story.

“So you did expect to see me to-night, Gracie?”

Miss Holbourne smiled, and gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“Yes, my darling, I came eighty miles for the chance of a couple of dances with you, and would come four hundred next week upon similar terms.”

“Don’t be foolish, Charlie. I am afraid I shall get dreadfully scolded about dancing with you to-night. How cruel your father was to you!”

“Forbidden ground, Gracie. Didn’t you promise never to touch upon that subject till I can tell you the whole story?”

“Yes,” replied the girl gravely, “and I can wait and can trust, but I only spoke of what I—what all the world saw to-night. However wicked you may have been, and I don’t think you’ve been very bad,” continued Grace, with a bright, loving smile, “Sir John might have recognised you.”

“You little Fatima, why will you keep playing with the key of the forbidden room? Do let’s leave Blue Beard’s closet alone for to-night. How many more dances am I to have?”

“Only one, I think. Well, perhaps two, if we are here long enough. But mind you must dance with Marion. Make Reginald introduce you when they come up from supper.”

Downstairs meanwhile Mr. Holbourne is in his glory. If there was one weakness that possessed the banker more

than another it was airing his rhetoric. He never missed an opportunity of getting on his legs. A regular attendant at all kinds of committees, boards, &c., he was always taking "advantage of the occasion to make a few remarks." Among some few other primitive customs retained by the Aldringham elders, was that of speechifying a little at the ball supper. I need scarcely add that a couple of strong policemen could have hardly retained the banker on his seat at a time so favourable for indulging in his speciality. Even when the two or three customary toasts fell neither in his province to propose nor to reply to, it was easy to introduce a supplementary health. When man once abandons himself to this pernicious gratification, he loses all control over himself, and can no more refrain from his besetting sin than the habitual gambler from the dice-box. Mr. Holbourne, one hand thrust into his waistcoat, and gently waving his double eye-glass with the other, rolls out his sonorous platitudes with an unctuous smile, which seems to insinuate that he is adapting his oratory to the capacity of his hearers—confining himself to their level, in short. This is completely part and parcel of the man's character. In the commonest relations with his neighbours he always bears himself with an air of condescending patronage. He shakes hands, drinks wine with them, or accepts their invitations to dinner, all with the same pompous air of conferring favour—and Aldringham takes him at his own valuation. By dint of thoroughly believing in himself, he has at last forced all his circle and locality to believe in him too. He is regarded as an excellent man of business, of considerable talent, and a very good speaker.

But the banker's speech comes to an end, winding up with his pet peroration, that "if the labours of himself and his colleagues have met the approbation of the public, they are amply repaid for the time and trouble it has cost them." It is the final oration, and people flock upstairs again to resume their gyrations. Marion Langworthy and her *fiancé* still linger in the room. The lady has thought proper to be extremely sentimental this evening, and latterly she has rather abstained from that line than otherwise.

"Well, Reginald," she says at last, "I suppose you must take me upstairs now—ours is not an avowed engagement, and people will talk. It was very nice of you to come, and has made my ball a charming one. It seems hard to see so little of you, and know, poor boy, that you are slaving, while I can do nothing but wait and hope. But if men woo and win penniless maidens, I am afraid it must be ever so. Ah! had I but known I was a portionless girl in those early days, I would never have consented to become a millstone round your neck."

What could a man of Reginald Holbourne's chivalrous notions do, under these circumstances, but protest in the constancy of his attachment, scoff at the idea of Marion's being a drag upon him, and vow that the hope of one day calling her his bride offered the strongest possible incentive to work.

This avowal being extracted, Marion entreated to be led upstairs again, feeling that she had accomplished her task satisfactorily. At certain intervals she took care that Reginald should be worked up to this point. It was a kind of renewal of the lease she had of him—a periodical examination of his chains. She liked to sound the moral fetters in which she held him at stated times, for the same reason that the railway official taps the tires and axles of the carriages, to ascertain that there is no flaw in the metal. The experiment had proved highly satisfactory, and Marion returned to the ball-room in great spirits, and intent upon much dancing. She was not only very fond of it, but a thorough proficient to boot. They do not always go together, and any ball-room will disclose plenty of very moderate performers, pursuing their hobby with most indifferent success. However, the same thing might be noted on other occasions. Men will hunt who can't ride. Men will persist in pigeon-shooting who seldom succeed in hitting one. Ladies will sing who have no voice. And we are all apt to speak when we have naught to say. One of the painful requirements of society is that of having to evolve conversation when you are conscious of having nothing to talk about. To be silent is to be voted dull, stupid, or, more ominous verdict still to an Englishman,

"shy." So we pour fourth our incoherent gabble at such times, and dread the falling through of our inane common-places.

Charlie Collingham had duly complied with Grace's instructions, and been presented to Miss Langworthy, but had not obtained a dance from that young lady, she pleading that her card was full.

"I can't say I much fancy your cousin, Grace," he remarked, as he told her how he had obeyed her behest, "though I don't in the least know why I should say so. My vanity is hurt, perhaps, as I could see pretty plainly she was by no means pleased at the introduction. And this is our last dance. When shall I see you again? Not for another four months, I suppose?"

"I'm sure I can't say. I don't even know if Aunt Wilkinson will ask me to town this season. She said she would, so I live in hopes. Shall I write you a line, Charlie, next time I see a chance of our meeting?" asked Grace, shyly.

"Yes, please; and depend upon my keeping tryst, let it be where it will. Ah! here comes Reginald to summon you. Mr. Holbourne has gathered Miss Langworthy under his wing, and evidently means going. Good-bye, and God bless you, dearest!" And pressing her hand warmly, Collingham resigned Miss Holbourne to her brother's charge.

Lighting a cigar, Charlie walked slowly home to the "George," musing on the events of the evening.

"Things don't look rosy, by any manner of means," he muttered. "The governor is determined evidently to have no mistake about the terms on which we stand. Old Holbourne was not a bit pleased to see me. Sum up. Heads of the two families decidedly dead against one. Miss Langworthy not likely, I think, to prove an ally; doubtful, perhaps, if she will remain neutral. On the other hand, Reginald, when he's put in possession of the state of affairs, will, I think, back me, and then—psha, deuce take all the rest! I have Grace herself on my side. How handsome she looked to-night! There wasn't a girl in the room to compare with her!"



CHAPTER V.

ALDRINGHAM GOSSIP.

THE day after the fair, the morning after the ball, the breakfast after the pantomime, are all wont to be tinged with sombre reflections. In the first flush of youth it may not be so, but we soon arrive at that stage of life at which we begin to ask whether the revel is worth the re-action, whether such gay evenings are worth such dull mornings, and whether a calm, humdrum life is not most compatible with human enjoyment, or, at all events, whether the dereliction of our usual habits is to be easily compensated for. The shooting must be good indeed that necessitates an eight o'clock breakfast; and the race course should be a mine of golconda that involves an early train, when we have passed thirty. We have experienced one or two practical sermons upon the text of "all is vanity" by that time. We have been rudely awakened from some few delusions, and we understand Mr. Lowell's lines,

"What infinite odds 'twixt a hero to come,
And your only too palpable hero *in esse!*
Precisely the odds (such examples are rife),
'Twixt the poem conceived and the rhyme we make show of,
'Twixt the boy's morning dream and the wake up of life,
'Twixt the Blondel God meant, and the Blondel I know of."

The breakfast party at Mr. Holbourne's this morning is by no means gay. The banker has betaken himself to his counting-house, but his son, daughter, and niece sit

languidly round the table, apparently immersed in their own reflections. The pale November sun glints through the windows, and throws an aureat light around Grace's rich brown hair, as she toys listlessly with her tea-spoon, lights up the fair pale face of Miss Langworthy, and causes Reginald to blink over his egg. Marion is musing upon the familiar terms her cousins apparently stand upon with Charles Collingham. She is not much surprised at Reginald's relations with him—that is natural, they are nearly of the same age; of course knew one another well as boys, and doubtless often met in London. But with Grace it is a very different thing. How comes she to know Mr. Collingham so well, and why has she never mentioned the circumstance? It is all very well for Reginald to laugh and say, "they have known each other all their lives," but when Mr. Collingham disappeared from Aldringham, Grace was a school girl of fourteen, while he was a young man of twenty-two. It was not likely that they could have seen much of each other at that time. What Charlie's reason for attending the Aldringham ball could be, unless it was to meet Grace, she could not divine. And then Miss Langworthy bethought her that Robert Collingham had paid her considerable attention last night. It was nothing, of course, to build upon as yet, but Marion esteemed Robert Collingham a fish that was well worth angling for, if he showed any inclination to look at her lure. Meanwhile, she would catechise Grace as soon as they should be left alone together.

This was destined to be speedily accomplished, for Reginald, rising, announced his intention of making a few calls in the town before his return to London, and left the house.

Now Miss Langworthy was a great social diplomatist. She very seldom asked a direct question upon any point on which she was anxious to be informed, and never committed herself to an abrupt interrogatory. She would from mere habit put people through an insidious cross-examination, to arrive at knowledge which they would have given her without hesitation had she but asked for it directly. On the same principle her views

and wishes on all points of domestic polity were always gently instilled, slowly insinuated, but rarely stated point-blank. She gave herself much unnecessary trouble at times in this way, but she was one of those morbid, scheming persons who cannot believe in attaining their ends except by indirect means. To use a metaphor of the whist-table, she never could resist the temptation of playing a false card. Nothing was too small to engage her attention. In default of more extensive machinations, she would pass an hour in persuading her uncle to eliminate two or three proposed guests from a dinner party, substituting others of her own selection without really caring one iota about the matter, but simply because it amused her to exercise her powers. Had she been born in a higher sphere, and her life been cast amongst the politicians of the day, she would have been a notable but unsuccessful *intriguante*. Her partiality for crooked ways and occult paths must have always precluded her attaining any great success in modern times, though in the last century she would probably have been a woman of mark. She was undeniably clever, if she could have got over her mistrust of humanity; but she could never quite grasp the fact that people more generally mean what they say. An unnatural character, I grant you. Life would be unbearable if such characters were common; but, still, Marion Langworthy at twenty-two had arrived at a deduction by no means singular in advanced life, of suspecting a hidden motive in the doings of those with whom she came in contact.

It is not so very difficult to understand, if you reflect upon it. A schemer yourself, and an adapter of chances and opportunities to your own designs, you are wont to endue your fellow-creatures with similar attributes. A confirmed blackleg never can believe in the honesty of his associates; and I should fancy a retired burglar would feel misgivings about many most worthy and excellent citizens, and picture to himself "jemmies and centre-bits" concealed in their railway bags.

Grace, meanwhile, sits wrapped in day dreams—visions in which Charlie Collingham plays a prominent

part. They are not actually engaged, he has never asked her to marry him, but it never occurs to Grace that there is any necessity for that formula passing between them. She would have replied, had she been asked, "It is just the same as if he had—he knows I shall never marry any one else." At nineteen we do talk in this fashion.

"Not a bad ball, Grace, was it?" says Miss Langworthy. "You seem hardly awake as yet. Are you very tired?"

"Wide awake, Marion," laughed the accused, "and good to dance again to-night, if I had but the chance."

"Was it not nice Reginald's turning up after all? He travelled down with an old friend in Mr. Collingham. He introduced me to him, and I was so sorry I hadn't a dance to spare. He dances well, too, doesn't he?"

"Yes—at least, I think so," replied Grace.

"Ah! I forgot. You are hardly a fair judge. People accustomed to dance together, get into one another's step; although, by the way, you can't have had much experience in that way of late."

Grace made no reply. She and her cousin were very good friends, but Miss Holbourne was not disposed to make a *confidante* of Marion.

"He is very good-looking," continued Miss Langworthy, meditatively. "I suppose you all knew him very well before he quarrelled with his father?"

"He was a great friend of Reginald's, and very often here in those times."

"Still, Grace, I think if I were you I wouldn't know too much of him now. It is awkward, considering the terms we are on with Sir John; and may give rise to complications, the which, my dear, are always to be avoided."

"I have nothing to do with his quarrel with his father," replied Grace, with rising colour, and a slight tremour in her voice. "I know nothing about it; but as long as Reginald holds to him, I most assuredly shall treat him as I always have done."

I am afraid that whatever the terms her brother might have been on with Charles Collingham, would have had

but little influence on Miss Holbourne's relations towards the latter at the present time.

Neither the flush nor the slight tinge of indignation in her cousin's reply escaped Marion's notice, but she made answer, gaily,

"Quite right to stand up for an old friend, Gracie; but you must be so changed since Mr. Collingham last saw you, that I almost wonder he recognised you."

"It would have been still more curious if he had not. I met him last year in town, when I was staying with the Wilkinsons—he is intimate there."

"Of course—yes—I forgot. I remember you told me something about it when you returned, but it escaped my memory," said Miss Langworthy, quietly. "Never having seen the gentleman, his name made no impression, I suppose."

This was Miss Langworthy's way. When she had extracted the information for which she had been angling, she was wont to turn the conversation off in this wise.

Grace opened her brown eyes, and gazed at her cousin in mute astonishment. She was perfectly certain that she had never mentioned her having met Charlie Collingham in London to her before, but Marion was now busying herself about some feminine work, and had apparently no further interest in the matter.

The abrupt appearance of Mr. Charles Collingham at the ball was the topic of conversation at a good many houses in Aldringham, and its vicinity. Gossip ran riot about his meeting with his father. There were rumours of a terrible scene between the pair in the cloak-room—certainly it was to be admitted that several well-informed people held to the opinion that the altercation had taken place in the passage. That high words had passed between them, was past dispute. Little Mr. Griggs, managing clerk to Stuff and Severn, the great agricultural implement makers, had met somebody who had it from a friend, who had been told by one of the waiters, that the Baronet had cursed his son after the most approved fashion of bygone melodrama. Mr. Silkstone, the Curate, declared that this version was incorrect; that he heard from the

best authority—namely, his servant, who had it from Duddles the fly-man, who was told it by a chambermaid at “The George,” that Sir John actually struck his son, and dared him to ever set foot again in Aldringham, lest worse should come of it. But that a serious *fracas* had taken place between father and son, Aldringham entertained no doubt whatever.

And, of course, once more the original cause of the quarrel became topic of conversation. A considerable portion of the community held that he had forged his father’s name to bills of large amount, which Sir John had taken up, conditional upon his leaving the country; another section pooh-poohed this story, and affirmed that he had married a woman of notoriously bad character—and there was not wanting a third party, who simply shook their heads, and wished it had been no worse than that. They were no gossips, heaven be praised! the boy was young, and might live to do better—they hoped he might. In the meanwhile, out of respect to his father, their mouths were closed. And yet many people had greeted Charlie Collingham cordially enough the night before in the ball-room.

As for the subject of all this talk and speculation, he had simply never gone to bed at all, but, having changed his dress, he smoked tranquilly till the departure of the early train, and was back again in London before Aldringham—that is, fashionable Aldringham—had un-closed its eyes.

Reginald Holbourne got very wrath and disgusted in his round of visits. At every house he entered he was doomed to hear some absurd version of the meeting between Charlie and his father. In vain he stood up for his friend. Had he seen him since the ball? was the invariable interrogatory; and when he was fain to answer No, he was told “Ah! of course, then, you can know nothing about it. The whole thing occurred just as they were leaving.” It was useless to point out that Sir John had left sometime before his son. “Yes, the ball-room, I grant you,” retorted his opponents; “but we are quite aware that *the scene* didn’t take place there. Sir John is the last man in the world to court publicity, and offend against good taste on such an occasion.”

When Reginald got home, there was only time for him to snatch a hasty luncheon and catch the train.

"And what news have you gathered for us in your wanderings this morning?" inquired Marion. "What has dear Mrs. Methringham picked up out of last night's entertainment? How many couples has she convicted of matrimonial intentions?"

"News!" ejaculated Reginald, with his mouth full of cold chicken—"well, Aldringham is so busy abusing Charlie Collingham at present, that they have no capacity to take in any other subject. If he had committed parricide, they couldn't be more unanimous in their abuse."

"What do they accuse him of, Regi?" inquired his sister, somewhat sharply.

"Oh! they have got half a hundred ridiculous stories about some tremendous row he had with his father last night after they left the ball-room. I don't believe he ever saw Sir John except in the room."

"Nor I," said Miss Holbourne. "His father's recognition, or, rather, non-recognition, was not likely to have led to words between them."

"Perhaps not, Gracie," said Miss Langworthy; "but there is generally a *soupçon* of truth even in an Aldringham rumour."

At this juncture the banker entered.

"Down at last, girls, eh? and none the worse for your dancing, I hope? You're just off, I suppose, Regi? I hear that impertinent young jackanapes you brought down with you contrived to still further embroil himself with his father last night?"

"I don't believe a word of it," retorted Reginald. "But Charlie used to be a favourite of yours—what has he done to make you speak so bitterly of him?"

"London life has not improved him by any means. His manner to his elders is flippant and offensively familiar. I was quite prepared to notice him and be civil to him last night, in spite of the peculiarity of his position, but the young gentleman brushed by me with a careless inquiry of my gout. Gout indeed!" and Mr. Holbourne quite snorted with indignation.

Reginald made no response. He was weary of attempting to stem the current of public opinion that was running so strong against his friend. He quietly saluted his cousin and sister, shook his father's hand, and departed.





CHAPTER VI.

CHURTON.



HURTON MANOR, the seat of the Collinghams, was situated about four miles from Aldringham. It stood a little way off the road, from which it was approached by a short, broad avenue, terminating in a large gravel ring—a quaint, red brick, many-gabled house, that had risen from its foundations some three hundred years ago, built in the form of an E, as was a prevailing fashion of those times, and with the escutcheon and motto of the Collinghams in stone standing out from the brickwork above the porch. Indeed, the family arms sculpted on stone were let into the masonry pretty frequently throughout the building. Right and left, as you entered, lay the garden, but on the left the garden was bounded by some thickly-wooded broken ground, while on the right a ha-ha separated it from the park, which ran round two sides of the house.

It was a wild, straggling, irregular park, interspersed with small coppices, groups of Spanish chestnuts, and patches of feathery fern, but not distinguished by much fine timber, the necessities of a Collingham of three generations back having impelled him to lay sacrilegious axe on the old oaks which had at one time adorned it. However, the place was well kept now, and fair to look upon in the long Summer days, when the chestnuts were

in their glory, and the coppices were all clothed in bright green foliage, and decked with wild flowers.

A shrewd, stern, just landlord was Sir John, managing his property with a high hand, but with a keen eye to its improvement. Little mercy had he upon slovenly farming and thriftless tenants. Such very soon received notice to quit their holdings on his estate. A more despotic lord of the soil never breathed, and woe to the farmer who should venture on the slightest breach of his covenant without due permission from the Baronet. In Ireland he would have been shot, or shot at, years before; and he was not at all the man to have been intimidated had the attempt proved unsuccessful. He held he had a most thorough right to do what he chose with his own land—to turn it into a wilderness or deer-forest, if it seemed good to him. But, practically, he was by no means a bad, if rather a hard landlord. He did not grind his tenants, and would lay out money on their farms, once show him proper cause for doing so, exacting fair interest for such expenditure. He was not precisely popular, and yet his dependents, although they looked upon him as a hard man, were fain to confess that he was a just one, and that, in his own grim fashion, he did them many a kindly turn at times. And that, moreover, he would stand up for, and fight tooth and nail for any of his own people who might be wrongfully dealt with.

He stands this morning with his back to the fire, glancing over the *Times*, and occasionally casting a somewhat impatient look at the breakfast-table. He has not to wait long. The door opens noiselessly, and a young lady glides softly into the room. She is fair, very fair, of medium height, and slight, girlish figure. She advances somewhat slowly, and with a slightly hesitating manner. It does not seem nervousness, it is too deliberate. Her delicate hands, too, just here and there touch the furniture lightly as she advances. So slight is this latter peculiarity, that it would have hardly attracted attention, except from a keen observer. Sir John turns as he perceives her, and the newspaper crackles slightly in his hand.

"Ah! my father, I am late, it seems," she says, with a smile. "I counted on the ball last night making a slug-gard of you this morning. I might have known you better, though."

"I haven't been down ten minutes, Sylla."

"No, but you are thirsting for tea, and wondering what your housekeeper is about, all the same. You shall have some directly."

She had seated herself in front of the urn by this time, and her slender fingers were busy with the tea-chest, &c. Once more an observer would have been struck by the hesitating movement of her hands. She never raised a spoon nor a cup abruptly, as other people would do, but seemed to linger softly over such movements. She lifts the teapot very close to the spout of the urn, and bends her head forward as she fills it; and, as she pours it out afterwards, it might have been noticed that she just touches the outside of the upper part of each cup with a finger of her left hand. Her arrangements being completed to her satisfaction, she exclaims, without turning her head,

"I have done my share, father: give me something to eat."

Sir John comes forward, takes his tea, and asks,

"What shall it be, Sylla? There's cold game on the side-board, grilled chicken, and boiled fowl here."

"Give me some chicken, please. Ah! thanks," she says, as he places the plate before her. "And now I want a knife and fork."

"They are just at your right hand, child," replied the Baronet, from the other side of the table.

She does not even turn her head in that direction, but her right hand feels lightly along the cloth, and from that gesture it would have suddenly flashed across a looker-on that she was blind. There was nothing to show it in the clear, limpid blue eyes. Aware of her affliction, you became conscious of the fixity of their apparent gaze at times, though you would hardly have guessed the night that was upon her from her somewhat deliberate movements about the room. But such was the fact—Sylla Collingham was stone blind. She had not been always

so—a dreadful fever, with which she had been stricken some six years before, although it had spared her life, had bereft her of sight. Long and terrible had been her struggle with death at that time, and though the destroyer had been fain at length to relax his grip, yet he had smitten with eternal darkness the victim that had so narrowly escaped him. Henceforth Sylla Collingham was doomed never more to see the blessed sunlight, the flowers, the green fields, nor to gaze upon the face of a fellow-creature.

There is something truly awful in the deprivation of sight. To live from thenceforth in a density of blackness. I have read of many punishments dealt out to man by his fellows, but nothing ever impressed me as so righteous or tremendous as Eugene Sue's description of the putting out the eyes of the *Maitre d'Ecole* in "Les Mysteries de Paris." He was a hideous, crime-stained ruffian of gigantic strength and stature, it may be remembered. They blinded him, and cast him back amidst the bandits of whom he had been chief, and the terror of his quarter became a thing for the *gamins* to mock.

Sir John, though now a widower, had been married twice. His first marriage had been one of expediency—he had bartered his title for the rich dowry the lady had brought him, wherewith to patch up a somewhat impoverished estate. The issue of that alliance had been Robert Collingham. The second time he had wedded to please himself, although his bride had come to him by no means empty-handed. He was a reserved man, and not much given to demonstration of the affections; but it was patent to those about him that he was much more attached to the two children his second wife had borne him, than to the son of his first. A hard, stern man by nature, his patience and tenderness with his afflicted daughter were marvellous to see. Never did a harsh word escape his lips to her. It did not take very much to make the Baronet display his bitter tember; but if one thing could kindle his wrath to a white heat, it was slight, carelessness, or neglect of anything appertaining to his daughter's wishes or feelings.

"You have told me nothing about the ball, father!"

exclaimed Sylla, gaily. "I must hear all about it, you know. Who were there, and who danced with whom? The prettiest girl—name her. Yes, we will have that first."

"I'm too old to be a very good judge of such things. I don't think I even should notice how people paired off, if it wasn't for you, Sylla."

"I know you do your best, father, to become all eyes for your blind daughter," replied the girl, softly, "so begin. Who was the belle?"

"Well, I don't think any one of them all beat my god-daughter."

"What, Gracie? I'm so glad. She was pretty as a child; and I know she must have grown up charming. I can tell, in my way; and she often comes here to see me. I *should* have enjoyed her triumph—she is one of my special favourites."

"Then Miss Langworthy looked well—always well-dressed, that girl; and so did the Miss Kenningtons. Reginald Holbourne, too, was there. He came from town on purpose, and goes back to day."

"I am sorry," said Sylla, gravely. "He always comes out to see me when he is down, and I like his visits. But, my father, who did Gracie dance with! Who monopolized the belle of the ball?"

"She danced with a good many people, child," replied Sir John, gravely—"perhaps with your brother Charles as much as anybody."

"What! was Charlie there?" cried the girl, with quivering lips.

"Yes," returned the Baronet, curtly—"very much to my annoyance. I left earlier than I otherwise should in consequence."

"Oh! father," almost whispered Sylla, in tremulous tones, "can this sad quarrel never be made up between you? I know not what it is; but you two are dearest in life to me, and it breaks my heart when I think of it. Surely my brother cannot have sinned past for givenness?"

Sir John's face was troubled; but his answer came in cold, measured tones.

"He took his own way, Sylla, in direct opposition to my wishes—nay, I may add, almost entreaties. I told him he should be no more son of mine if he disobeyed me on that whereon we differed. He elected to do so. I have no intention of departing from my decision. Don't think, child, that it has cost me nothing ; I have felt it probably more than he has done."

Excepting to his beloved daughter, Sir John would have made this admission to no one breathing.

"Father, I can't believe Charlie has been so much to blame as you may think. Ah! if he could but write to *me!*" And the tears stood in Sylla's eyes as she thought how helpless she was—those poor eyes to which all was darkness, to which letters were sheets of paper containing nothing.

"Say no more, child. We agreed long since that discussion on that point could be but painful to both of us. I mentioned your brother's appearance at the ball simply because you were certain to hear of it from other quarters. Let there be an end of the matter now."

Sylla bowed her head meekly. She knew well every inflection of her father's voice, and recognised that she should not further her brother's cause by prolonging the conversation. All her curiosity about the ball had ceased, and she sat absorbed in old memories.

Her thoughts travelled back to her school-room days, when there was no such pleasure in life as the obtaining leave to go for a long afternoon's ramble or a day's fishing with Charlie. Four years her senior, he had ever made a great pet of his little sister, and it was constantly due to his intercession that she received licence to accompany him on such occasions. She recalls long gorgeous summer days when they took their luncheon with them, and spent hours wandering by wood and stream—when Charlie filled her lap with wild flowers, and his creel with trout, sometimes giving his rod to her when he had hooked a fish, and allowing her the supreme joy and gratification of landing it. How he read the wondrous stories of Walter Scott to her under the trees, when the trout, grown lazy with the Summer heat, refused to look at a fly: or shot squirrels and rabbits for her delectation.

All these things come stealing back to her memory. Then, as the tears tremble on her eyelashes, she recalls what he was to her in those days of convalescence ; she muses how gentle and tender he had been when she reeled back, broken, crushed, and blinded, from the very threshold of the grave ; how he carried her in his arms to their pet seat under the old apple-tree, that she might drink in the warm Spring air ; how he never wearied of wheeling about her chair, and would sit patiently with her hand clasped in his for an hour at a time, humouring this whim that came to her in that first great agony when she was told that eternal darkness was henceforth her portion. She thought of all this ; how, with a delicacy unsurpassed of woman, he had helped her to bear her cross in those days when her affliction was still new and all-terrible to her. How many a time and oft he had thrown over cricket-match or croquet-party to loiter through a sunny afternoon by the side of his blind sister, and strive, as far as might be, to make her forget the night that now enshrouded her.

Four years had now elapsed since she had heard the sound of his voice, and yet, for the two preceding years, he had been nearly everything to her. In the early stage of blindness we must rely upon some one of those about us ; we may, perhaps, trust to several, in the first instance, but speedily we begin to lean upon one. It may be that that one individual has more vivid powers of description than the others—it may be that his or her mind assimilates more with our own ; it may be (and this is most probably the case) that great affection and sympathy have led some one of our kindred to dedicate much time to the soothing of our sorrow. This one person becomes in some measure “ eyes ” to us. It is to him we look for a true and veracious account of what passes. But later on—I am speaking, bear in mind, of those deprived of sight in the fulness of their strength—nature begins, in some measure, to compensate us for our loss. The sense of hearing becomes much more fine and delicate—the slightest inflection of voice is noted, as formerly was the play of feature—the perception of touch becomes infinitely more acute. It is marvellous to

see the ease with which the blind move about amidst the localities to which they are habituated, always, nevertheless, with that slight, hesitating, deliberate movement consequent on some little uncertainty as to whether their known landmarks may not have been in some way disturbed.

The separation from her brother had been a sore trial to Sylla. Hot tears had she shed, and passionate had been her entreaties to know in what manner he had so offended that he should be banished from his father's roof. But Sir John was inexorable, he refused to touch upon that point. He strove hard to supply Charlie's place, and was devoted to every wish or whim of his stricken daughter.

"He cannot be so much to blame as you think, papa," she would cry. "A brother who could be so good to me as he has been, would never do that which is past forgiveness, if you did but know the truth."

"There is nothing further for me to know, child. Let the subject never be alluded to again, Sylla. It is touching on a point which can but be painful to both of us."

And so all mention of her own brother had gradually disappeared from that household; the servants had been made aware that their places would be forfeited should the proscribed name ever escape their lips. But it is not to be supposed that Sylla did not often think sadly over the bygone days, and wonder whether she should ever meet Charlie again—and now to hear that he had been so near her, that he was gone without coming to see his blind sister! True, she knew he could not—that the servant who had admitted him at Churton would have been discharged next morning; but it seemed cruel, hard, unjust, and Sylla dropped her head upon her hand, and thought that it was a callous, troublous world she lived in.





CHAPTER VII.

THE TENANTS OF THE GROUND-FLOOR.

REGINALD HOLBOURNE, once more in the old rooms in Baker Street, looks back upon the Aldringham ball with very mitigated feelings of satisfaction. The renewed assurance of his cousin's love ought to have delighted him—that evening should have appeared all one roseate dream to reflect upon; but then, somehow, it was not so. He could have wished Marion had been a little less fond—no, it was not quite that—but he did think that he should have been better pleased if she had regarded him not quite so much as her own peculiar property. She had made him feel most thoroughly that he was her husband in prospective. So he was, of course, but though he tried hard to cheat himself into the belief that he had no wish to recall the past, he could not help wincing when his *financée* made him conscious of his chains.

If it had not been for the wreck of Marion's fortune, he thought it would have been easy to tell her that their engagement was a mistake; but as things were, he looked upon it that it was impossible to withdraw from his plighted troth unless Marion should herself express a wish in that respect. She had apparently little idea of doing so.

He had dined alone in his rooms. His dinner, after the custom of such banquets, when cooked by the staff

appertaining to a bachelor's lodgings, had proved eminently unsatisfactory. The fish had been by no means beyond suspicion; the beefsteak had been tough beyond a doubt; while nobody could have considered the potatoes boiled except the delinquent in the kitchen. He has written several sulky letters, such letters as a man does write whose food has not been to his liking; and now he has betaken himself to tobacco, and the latest fiction it has pleased Mudie to bestow upon him. The novel interests him, the pipe is soothing and forgetting all past *désagréments*. he takes but little note of the hour. The clock on the mantelpiece has chimed twelve some time back, and still Reginald Holbourne reads on. It is a quiet, decorous house, and the dwellers therein, except himself, are usually all in bed by eleven.

At length he fancies he hears a bell—an unusual circumstance at that time; he raises his head and listens, and is now quite conscious of footsteps and the soft rustle of a woman's dress on the landing. Another second, and then comes "a knocking at his chamber door." Reginald springs to his feet and opens it.

A candle in her hand, the silken tresses tumbling in heavy masses about her shoulders, and in *deshabille* generally, stands a slight girlish figure, her face ashy pale, the big dark eyes dilated with terror.

"Pardon me, sir," she stammers, "I am so frightened—my grandfather is so ill! I can't make them hear the bell. Help me, I pray, for I don't know what to do!"

"Of course, but let me see your grandfather first," replies Reginald. "I shall be a better judge of what is best to do then."

"Oh! thank you, this way; come quick!" and the girl glided downstairs, and led the way into a room on the ground-floor.

Lying on the bed, partially dressed, was an old man, whose face indeed looked blanched with the pallor of death. Prone, nerveless, and motionless, except for the slight quivering of the lips, one might have deemed that the soul had already escaped its prison-house. A slight froth oozed from the poor tremulous mouth, sole

sign of vitality that yet lingered. Gently Reginald raised the helpless gray head a little higher on the pillow, and then turning to his companion said,

"Your grandfather is very ill. I am going to rouse some of the people of the house and then to fetch a doctor. Don't be frightened, but sit here and watch. Recollect help is coming to you."

She stared at him wildly, then bending forward she whispered :—

"Do you think he is dying, sir? I have never seen him like this before."

"I trust not—we must hope for the best;" and Reginald dashed out of the room. Rushing to the top of the house, with small reverence for the sleepers whose dreams he might disturb, he soon roused some of the servants; then snatching up a hat and coat, he sallied forth in pursuit of a medical man. Half an hour elapsed, during which the girl sat with one of the poor lifeless hands clasped in her own; her eyes fixed upon the pale face, every nerve strained to catch the sound of the approaching succour. A sleepy-looking, half-dressed maid-servant sits helplessly blinking in a chair at the foot of the bed; her countenance expressive of the dismay characteristic of her class under such circumstances. Ere hand can touch the bell, the quick ears of the anxious watcher catch the footfalls on the pavement.

"The door!—quick, Sarah!" she ejaculates, "I hear the doctor!"

Another moment, and Reginald Holbourne, accompanied by a dark, florid, stout, keen-eyed gentleman, is in the room. The stout gentleman takes in the whole scene at a glance, quietly takes a candle from the table, and peers into the ashen face that lies so still upon the pillow. With practised finger and thumb he draws back the eyelid, and then quickly and anxiously places his hand on the sufferer's chest.

"Vital power barely flickering," he mutters. "Get some brandy—quick!" he says quietly to Reginald. "If I can get some stimulant down at once, all may yet be well, but his life at present trembles in the balance."

Holbourne runs up to his own room, snatches a bottle

from a spirit-case, and is back again in a minute. He raises the patient's head, in accordance with the doctor's directions, and the latter cautiously introduces the spirit between the bloodless lips. At first his efforts seem unavailing, but gradually some few drops of the liquid find their way down the unconscious man's throat; even that little seems to rouse him into a spasmodic effort to swallow, and the doctor's face lightens as he at last succeeds in administering very nearly a table-spoonful. The stimulant tells speedily; the eyelids flutter tremulously, and a long-drawn sigh escapes the sufferer.

"That's better. Gently, Mr. Holbourne; raise his head a little higher, please. If we can only succeed in making him swallow that dose over again, we shall do."

Once more are their efforts crowned with success; the patient opens his eyes, and gazes feebly about him. With Reginald's help the old gentleman was now rapidly put to bed. Mutely had his grandchild hovered about the room, giving deft assistance as far as lay in her power.

"You, I suppose, are his nurse?" said the doctor, addressing her, when he had got all arranged to his satisfaction. Give him a table-spoonful of brandy mixed with another of cold water every four hours, till I see you again. I shall call in the morning; and mind he is kept warm."

"Will he recover, sir?" said the girl, timidly.

"I trust so," returned the doctor; and for the first time it struck him how young she was. "Have you no relations to send to?" he inquired kindly. "It will probably be a tedious illness, and you had better let your friends know that your grandfather is seriously unwell to-morrow."

He had gathered the relationship that existed between them from Holbourne on his way thither.

"He has only me, as I have only him," returned the girl gravely. "Good night, sir," she continued, extending her hand to Reginald. "I can't thank you for all your kindness properly now, but, believe me, I am not ungrateful." And then she bent her head in acknowledgment of their parting salutes.

"Sad thing, sir!" exclaimed the doctor, turning round

upon the doorstep. "To think of a child like that being left alone in the world! I shall pull the old gentleman through this attack, I fancy, but his life won't be worth twelve months' purchase all the same. Do you know anything about them?"

"Nothing in the least. I told you all I knew on our way here. Good night."

You may inhabit rooms in a London lodging-house, and know next to nothing of your co-tenants; but when people live for a length of time under the same roof, they cannot fail to acquire some knowledge of their neighbour's personality and status. You pass each other on the stairs, or meet upon the doorstep. The servants, too, are wont to be extremely communicative, and are willing to volunteer much extraneous information, should you hazard inquiry as to the name of the people who live above or below you. Consequently, Reginald Holbourne was quite aware that the rooms beneath his own were tenanted by a Mr. and Miss Cheslett. He occasionally caught a glimpse of a pretty girl about sixteen, with glossy dark hair, and attired with extreme simplicity, whom he, of course, recognised as that young lady; but that was the extent of his knowledge, except that he had once heard the maid-servant speak of her as Miss Lettice.

Reginald tumbled into bed, and thought little more about the troubles of "the ground-floor;" but as he went out on his way to business the next morning, he tapped at the door to inquire after the invalid. It was opened by Miss Cheslett in person, no longer in the dishevelled state of last night, but with her luxuriant hair neatly braided, and a close-fitting grey merino dress, showing off her lithe girlish figure.

"Better? Yes, thank you," she replied, in answer to his inquiries. "Better, almost, than I dared hope for. What should I have done without you last night? It was very kind of you!"

"Nonsense," interrupted Reginald. "I won't hear another word about it. Anybody you had awakened would have done just the same. My rooms being nearest, you of course came to them first. I am glad to hear so

good an account, and trust to hear of still further progress when I return in the afternoon."

She made no answer, but gave him a bright little nod as he passed on; and, as he walked up to the underground station, Reginald Holbourne came to the conclusion that Miss Cheslett was a very pretty girl.

From this day Reginald's intimacy with the Chesletts advanced rapidly. The morning inquiries speedily led to his going in for a few minutes; then he had to be introduced to Mr. Cheslett, and thanked for the service he had rendered; then, again, the door was often open for air when he came home in the afternoon, and if Lettice looked up with her bright smile, it was but natural that he should stop to exchange a few words with her.

He had lent Lettice some books, also, to wile away those weary vigils she had been forced to keep, during the first week or so of her grandfather's illness. The girl had asked eagerly for more. Her own modest little library she knew by heart, and a fresh book was a great treat to her. They were poor, and had to study the economies closely. Subscription to a circulating library would have seemed, to old Mr. Cheslett, an extravagance all unwarranted. He himself read nothing but the paper, and some few volumes of plays. To those fond of reading, and with little or no access to a fresh supply of mental food, a book new to them is indeed a pleasure.

I have heard it said that you must have at some time known what hunger really means to thoroughly appreciate a good dinner. That you must have, at some time of your life, known what it really was *to live* upon two or three books, I am convinced is necessary to thoroughly comprehend the blessing of an unlimited supply of them. This led, of course, to Lettice consulting him about her reading generally. Gradually he became a sort of instructor to the lonely little girl. She applied to him for assistance when passages or authors he recommended proved rather beyond her comprehension. Was delighted to pour out her girlish enthusiasm for Scott, Tennyson, Mrs. Browning, or Dickens, as he sat drinking tea with them. She was a clever, warm-hearted, impassioned girl, who had so far enjoyed small opportunity of cultivating

ner mind. Such chances as had fallen to her she had by no means neglected, but the solitary life she and her grandfather led had afforded but few opportunities. Now Reginald supplied her with books in profusion, and Lettice dwelt in Fairyland. She would spend the morning over the glowing pages of "Kenilworth," scamper round the Regent's Park in the afternoon, and come back ready almost to weep over the sorrows of Amy Robsart, when she discussed the story with Reginald in the evening.

From consulting him about books, she rapidly advanced to taking his opinion upon all points, and he was now often called upon to decide on the colour of a ribbon, or the fashion of a bonnet. To an isolated girl like Lettice, it may be easily conceived how rapidly Reginald Holbourne would become all in all. She idealized him. He was the first well-educated man, at all approaching her own age, she had ever come in contact with. What wonder she soon placed him on a pedestal, fell down and worshipped him!

And what, all this time, were Reginald's feelings? Like many young men in such a situation, he declined to analyze them. He was an engaged man, and therefore there could be no harm in showing some kindness to this solitary child, whose life was so dull and monotonous. He began to feel it pleasant to think, on his way home, that there were a pair of soft, dark eyes anxiously looking out for his coming; that a pair of quick ears would catch his footfall on the doorstep, before he could touch the bell; and that a bright, sunny face would welcome him the moment the door should open. It was seldom, of late, that he had had to ring. Lettice generally opened the door for him herself.

So Reginald continued to drop in of an afternoon, and talk poetry, and occasionally spent his evening in Mr. Cheslett's room. Those letters to Marion became more wearisome to write week by week, and were a source of much mental torture, remorse, and bemoaning.

Grandfather Cheslett puzzled Reginald a good deal. He was a quiet, courteous old gentleman, who said but little, and dropped no clue from which to infer in what groove of life his feet had trod. In the earlier stages of

his intimacy with the Chesletts, Mr. Cheslett's health had of course been cause enough for little conversation on his part. But as his convalescence became established, Reginald had discovered but two traits in his character—firstly, that he was extremely well read in the Elizabethan dramatists; secondly, that he was a man of parsimonious habits. This second trait told nothing, the probability being that Mr. Cheslett was a man of very limited means, and had to exercise careful supervision to live as he did. Reginald often caught himself speculating upon what career Mr. Cheslett might have pursued in his youth. Whatever it was, it had apparently been by no means prosperous. Lettice made no disguise about the narrowness of their means, and laughed merrily over the furbishing up of her old bonnets.

It was one of the young man's whims at this time to see how Lettice would look clad in silk attire. Thanks to her own clever fingers, and naturally good taste, she was always neatly and nicely dressed: but Reginald longed to see her in fashionable costume. How to effect this had puzzled him for some weeks. He had cast about in his own mind for some special pretext on which to present her with a new robe, but without success. They were walking together one afternoon in Oxford Street—no uncommon circumstance with them now—when Lettice, pausing before a mercer's window, began to prattle about the dresses displayed therein, and express her opinion as to how they would make up. One in particular especially attracted her attention, and looking laughingly up at Reginald, she exclaimed—

"How nice it must be to have money—if I were rich now, I should go in and buy that. How grand I should look in it!"

"We will buy that, Lettice, if you like," he replied. "Let us go in."

But she hung back on the threshold, and her face was troubled. Her cheeks flushed as she said,

"I would rather not. I couldn't accept that from you, Mr. Holbourne. Please come away."

He had more than once brought her home a new ribbon for her bonnet, a book, or some such trifle, and

Lettice had accepted it with delight, and been eloquent in her thanks; but, ignorant of the world's ways, and child as she was, her womanly instinct told her that she could not accept costly gifts at his hands.

"What nonsense!" he exclaimed. "I should like to see you in that, Lettice. Come in."

"No, no," she replied hurriedly—"I couldn't—indeed I couldn't, Mr. Holbourne. How stupid I was to admire it! but—but," and she looked almost ready to cry with vexation, "I did not think you could have so misunderstood me."

"I have not misunderstood you at all," he replied. "It was a whim of mine to see you in brave array. I forgot for the moment that you might not like to accept such a present from me. Let us say no more about it, Lettice."

They walked on without further reference to the subject; but it was, nevertheless, forgotten by neither of them.

When the Queen of Sheba presented Solomon with two roses, of which one was real, and the other artificial, that sagacious monarch called in the bees to assist him to a decision as to which was the true rose. There are two loves proffering themselves to Reginald Holbourne at this present, of which the one is a counterfeit, the other as pure as ever glowed in a woman's breast. I wis he will scarce need such councillors when called upon to decide between them.





CHAPTER VIII.

CHARLIE AT HOME.



ROOM off Fleet Street: the furniture of the primitive order. It consists of two or three desks, a couple of arm-chairs, a strong square table, on which are a paste-pot, a pair of scissors, and a pile of newspapers. A couple of men stand scribbling at the desks; two more are conversing in a low tone at the fireplace. It is the sub-editor's room of *The Morning Misanthrope*, and that valuable journal is at the present moment in process of incubation. *The Misanthrope* takes a disparaging view of most things. It looks upon the country as drifting rapidly to destruction, the Established Church as doomed; it prophesies upheaval and removal of ancient landmarks. Very pet phrase of *The Misanthrope's* this last; it looks upon the intellect of the nation as deteriorating; that its energies are sapped by wealth and luxury, that it is enervated both physically and morally, and that a few years will see the imposition of the yoke of the invader or the rule of the Commune. By no means a cheerful paper to find on your breakfast-table, but if you think that *The Misanthrope* had but a limited circulation in consequence of its despondent views you are wonderfully mistaken. The croakers of humanity are numerous as the croakers of the marsh, and *The Misanthrope* appealed to a

large class of readers when it first put forth its gloomy and alarmist columns. Some people have a taste for funerals and executions. The room of horrors at Madame Tussaud's is generally fairly filled. What crowds will throng to gape at a monstrosity! What numbers still peruse Dr. Cumming's vaticinations with extreme interest! To a considerable section of society the dire forebodings of *The Misanthrope* occasioned much gratification; there is a pleasurable excitement in thinking you live on the verge of all the woes of revolution, when in your inmost heart you feel no real anxiety about the safety of the Constitution. It was that which made O'Connell so powerful with his countrymen. They enjoyed all the glories of revolution without its inconveniences under his judicious guidance. When Smith O'Brien and his coadjutors attempted something of the same kind, they fell into the mistake of being too realistic. Discomfiture and, still worse, fatality, ridicule, was the upshot of their anarchies.

In Ireland to be laughed at is, as in Paris, a death-blow to a reputation.

"There, Drayton!" exclaimed one of the writers, "I think that will do. That's as much as I can make out of 'The Communists in London' for the present. It's a good stirring article for elderly ladies or despondent Conservatives of the old school, and should induce a pleasing sensation of our being very near the vortex of revolution." And leaving his desk, the speaker strolled over towards the fire.

"All right, Charlie, I dare say it will do," replied the editor. "You know Bullock, of course?"

"Oh! yes," said Collingham, as he shook hands with the stout, middle-aged man, who had been engaged in conversation with Drayton. Mr. Bullock and I have passed an evening together before this. But what brings him here? Has he brought grist for the mill?—food for the insatiable maw of *The Misanthrope*?"

"No. He has come to make a few inquiries about the advertisement sheet. Don't you recollect that one we have so often laughed over, of 'the rich widow lady who wants to meet with another lady of good fortune,

and a mind above petty conventionalities, and with whom she might enjoy life, &c.’”

“Of course! What about it, Bullock? I have been consumed with curiosity about that advertisement often.”

“Well, sir, I can’t exactly tell you at present, but it strikes me forcibly that it is the work of an old friend of ours, the cleverest practitioner in his line in all London; a man we have had hold of three or four times, but who always slips through our fingers. A regular eel that chap is; he’s lived on the public for years. There’s no end to his dodges or his aliases.”

“What did the clerk say who took the advertisement, Mr. Drayton?”

“Oh, he recollected all about it perfectly. A peculiar advertisement like that naturally made him look at the inserter. He says it was brought by a well-dressed, lady-like woman, apparently about thirty. What do you make of that, Bullock?” inquired Collingham.

“Nothing that’s any good,” replied the detective; “that would be his wife, most probably; quite answers to her description, if I am right in my supposition that Leonidas Lightfoot is the author of that advertisement. But you see, Mr. Collingham, I have nothing to go on at present. No fraud has been committed as yet that I am aware of. It only struck me, when I saw that notice, that was what would probably come of it, and if I could make out where to put my hand on Lightfoot, it would be useful, if my guess proved right.”

“Lightfoot,” muttered Collingham, musingly; “I have heard that name somewhere—ay, and met the man, if my memory don’t deceive me.”

“Like enough, sir,” replied Bullock. “You probably paid, in some shape, for the making of his acquaintance, too.”

“Yes, I have it—you are right. I did,” replied Charlie, with a burst of laughter. “It was at Scarborough. I was there with Jim Donaldson, and we were smoking our cigars in front of the Royal Hotel, when this man joined us, asked for the favour of a light, and entered into conversation. He was as pleasant a companion as one need wish to meet with, and his cool, cynical

remarks upon men and manners amused us both much. Finally, he insisted upon our having some brandy and water with him, for which he paid. When we got up he said, 'Gentlemen, I have spent my last three shillings in entertaining you, and regret that we shall not meet again here, as business calls me to the metropolis. I must trespass on your exchequer for a couple of sovereigns, to pay my railway fare. I won't put it as a loan; my experience of men tells me they are apt to forget such petty borrowings. I only ask you to give me a couple of sovereigns, and should we next meet under other circumstances, I shall be happy to be a friend to either of you. The ups and downs of life are so various, and the world so very small, that it is only a species of investment after all.' Jim and I looked at one another for a moment; we both then burst out laughing—we were so fairly taken in. The fellow looked, too, as cool and unabashed as if he had made the most ordinary proposition in the world. However, it ended in our giving him what he asked for. He thanked us quite airily, hoped we should have a pleasant time of it, and left without showing the slightest sense of being under any obligation."

"And you have never seen him since?" asked Drayton.

"No, I have not; but, odd to tell, Donaldson met him one day at the Croydon station. He came up at once, said, 'How do you do?' and then added, 'going to town, I suppose?' 'Yes,' replied Jim. 'Most fortunate! You once took a railway ticket for me; I have now the opportunity of acknowledging the courtesy.' Before Jim could say a word he had disappeared into the booking-office, from which he emerged in a few moments with a first-class ticket for London. 'There,' he said, presenting it gravely. 'I told you the world was small. You assist your fellow-worms here, they assist you there. It comes to exactly the same thing in the end. The wealth of the universe, in its ebb and flow, must, of course, pass through the hands of the intelligent. Whether one is in the flood-tide or the neap, is a mere temporary accident.' They travelled up together, and parted excellent friends."

"That was Lightfoot all over," remarked Mr. Bullock, philosophically. "Some on 'em never pays, but he always was good for about eighteenpence in the pound, and that's what has saved him so often. If I order five hundred pounds worth of goods, and pay twenty-five on account, and a trifle more the moment I am dunned, no jury, you see, will convict me of 'obtaining under false pretences.' That's the principle he goes on. But I must be off. Morning, gentlemen; and thank you, Mr. Drayton."

"Always welcome to any help we can give you," replied the editor, as the detective made his way to the door. "Now, Charlie, if you have any valuable ideas to impart, let's hear them."

"Bless you, I'm played out—sucked dry for the present. I have gone down to the very lees yonder," and Collingham jerked his head in the direction of the desk, where his still wet manuscript was lying. "No, I'm off home—good-bye."

Once in the street, Charlie turned his face westwards, and strode manfully along. All this was part of the daily routine of his life. Upon his quarrel with his father, he had found himself left to confront life upon something under two hundred a year. He fell back upon his pen, to supplement that somewhat insufficient income. As a matter of course, at starting he found this very far from a profitable avocation. But matters had mended in this respect of late, and he was now thoroughly accredited of the guild, and very fairly paid, to boot. He tramps up the Strand, turns down Spring Gardens, and stretches away across St. James's Park, up Constitution Hill, then, turning to the left, proceeds to make his way in the direction of Brompton. Upon arriving at a quiet little house in Pelham Street, he applies his pass-key, enters, and runs upstairs. As he throws open the door of a sitting-room on the first-floor, a man some two or three years older than himself raises his head from the table at which he is busy writing, and says,

"Back rather earlier than usual, eh, Charlie? The funeral journal, I presume, was flush of copy to-day?"

"Yes, we had stuff in hand, and were not called upon

to rack our brains to any great extent to fill up. How goes on 'Caspar's Courtship?'"

"Petty fairly. I have been hammering at it the last three hours, and done some decent dialogue, I think. But ring for Dulcibella—I am going to knock off now; and the spirit moveth me to imbibe in some fashion."

The speaker was Jim Donaldson, the dramatist, of whom we have already heard mention. He was Collingham's great chum, and had been mainly instrumental in putting him in the way of getting literary work on his first start in London. They had been friends at the University, and were now joint tenants of the house at Brompton.

The room is a very type of such an apartment as men of their pursuits would inhabit. There is a writing-table under each window; a round table in the centre, strewn with magazines, books, and newspapers—a few odd volumes lie scattered on the carpet; a sofa; a couple of easy-chairs, and a piano, are amongst the furniture. On the top of the latter lie half a dozen or so of play-bills. The looking-glass is stuck full of cards, most of them having a theatrical tendency; while the mantelpiece is littered with pipes and cigar-cases. The walls are decorated with some good proof engravings, and a few photographs of popular actors and actresses—gifts these latter to Donaldson, and for the most part commemorative of successes obtained by the donors in some one or other of his comedies.

But here the door opens, and Dulcibella makes her appearance, a buxom young person of about thirty; she is the daughter of their landlady, and acts as parlour-maid. She is a great favourite of the young men, and is regularly re-christened, about once a fortnight. They tell her gravely that it is necessary for their work that every time she is re-christened, she represents a fresh heroine to them; and they draw from the life, and that it is requisite to keep the model always before the eye; so that it is incumbent upon her to humour their whims in this particular—that any mutiny on her part might lead to the utter destruction of a comedy, or annihilation of a magazine article.

"It is not that you are the exact image, you know," said Donaldson to her, gravely, upon one occasion; "but you represent the rough marble, Polly, which I intend to mould into grace and beauty."

"Go along with your chaff, Mr. Donaldson," replied Miss Meggott, promptly. "You can call me what you like, only mind, don't forget I have my order as usual for the first night."

"Sophonisba, thy mandate shall be obeyed," replied the dramatist.

She happened to be Sophonisba that week. But Polly Meggott was no fool, and laughed over her numberless titles as much as anybody. She took the greatest pride in the doings of both her masters, read Collingham's lucubrations in the *Morning Misanthrope*, or articles in the Magazines, and expressed her opinion freely thereon; while it must have been a grievous mischance that prevented her attending the first night of one of Donaldson's comedies; and the pit or upper boxes held no more enthusiastic supporter than Polly Meggott was wont to be on such occasions.

Molière, it is said, used to test his work by reading it to his housekeeper, and Jim Donaldson always declared that he had been indebted to Polly Meggott for more than one shrewd hint, after Polly had witnessed a representation, and that he had occasionally either cut or added indirectly at her instigation.

"Now, young people, what is it?" inquired Miss Meggott, her bright, black eyes twinkling with fun. "You've been churning your brains hard all the morning, Mr. Donaldson, I know; I only hope the butter came at last. But, as for Mr. Collingham, there, he's home before his time; that means watering the milk. You'll read washy to-morrow—I know you will."

"Dulcibella, you are forgetting that you are a princess this week, and that washy is a term not in vogue in courtly circles," retorted Charlie.

"No, and skim milk ain't in vogue, as you call it anywhere."

"Dulcibella," said Donaldson, "you must be more careful about your grammar, in your present exalted

position. I never can get you to recollect your situation."

"Oh! bother my grammar!" retorted Polly, laughing. "The reviewers will, may-be, pick holes in some of your own. But," she continued, with suddenly assumed gravity, "did your Excellencies ring?"

"'Crave my presence,' would be the neat way to put it," rejoined Donaldson. "Yes! thy worshippers are athirst, and would fain partake of soda and sherry, O peerless Dulcibella!"

"To hear is to obey, O Commander of the Faithful!" replied Miss Meggott, with a low reverence, the effect of which was, in some measure, spoilt by a palpable wink, and she vanished in search of the required potables."

Polly often entered into the spirit of her various nick-names, and, from much frequenting of theatres, had acquired a mixed and miscellaneous jargon of melodramatic language, which she at times produced effectively in such assumptions.

"Well," said Jim at length, after he had induced his pipe to go to his satisfaction, "what news have you collected in your walks abroad?"

"Nothing much. Stop!—by the way, who do you think looked in at our shop to-day in search of information?—Bullock!"

"Ah! that's worth hearing about. What did he want?" inquired Donaldson, lazily.

"A particular friend of yours, Jim—Lightfoot to wit."

"No! Goodness gracious! I trust my esteemed friend Lightfoot hasn't sailed a little too near the wind, and entangled himself amongst the quicksands of the law."

"Well, not exactly that," replied Collingham, "but the lynx-eyed Bullock thinks he probably may do so shortly. You recollect that queer advertisement in our paper? I pointed it out to you the other day."

Jim nodded assent.

"Well, that is presumed to be Mr. Lightfoot's handiwork, and the swindling of some demented female the object."

"Ah!" laughed Donaldson, "I shouldn't wonder. I recollect the day I came up with him from Croydon

that great philosopher observed: 'The foolishness of men passeth belief, but the credulity of women is beyond all comprehension.' He further remarked very severely on the simplicity of the police, who, he declared, seldom succeeded in bringing home a great crime, except it had been committed by an uneducated person. 'The educated criminal often convicts himself from mere foolhardiness,' he said; 'long evasion of the law is apt at last to induce a contempt for the most ordinary precautions, and then, forsooth, you hear of the intelligence of the police.' No, Charlie, I shall back my friend to beat Bullock, let alone his last observation."

"And what was that?"

"Why, as we shook hands, he said, 'I can see you don't believe what I have been telling you. Well, if ever you want to test it, employ me to obtain you any information anywhere against the police. You shall give me forty-eight hours start, for this reason: I don't want the waters muddied before I begin, and I will guarantee that what you desire to know is in your hands considerably more than two days before you obtain that intelligence from the police.'"

"Now, your Serene Highnesses," observed Miss Meggott, as she entered with a tray. "Here we are—the sherry you alluded to, because it sounds well, and the brandy you mean having, I suppose, because it drinks better. Now look sharp; the cork is nearly out," continued Polly, who was busily manipulating a bottle of soda-water. "Cognac for two?—I knew it! Bless you, my cherubs!"

"Dulcibella, you're forgetful of your noble station, and are waxing into most derogatory language."

"It won't do, Mr. Donaldson," laughed Polly. "I can't come the princess, and open such restive soda-water as this. Wait till I have done with the other bottle. There! now, caitiffs, have done with your guzzlings and gugglings, or, by my father's head, I swear"—and here Polly drew herself up, and stamped her foot—"I'll—I'll play old gooseberry with you!"

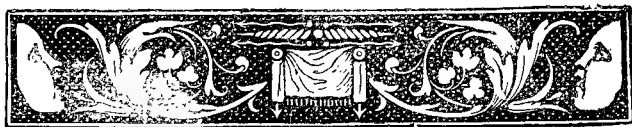
"Miserable Dulcibella! what a pitiable climax!" said Collingham.

"Don't bandy words with me, slave!" retorted Miss Meggott, striking an attitude—"the door, ye scum, the door!" and with her customary pleasant wink, the young lady motioned that Charlie should open it.

He obeyed, laughing, and held it open with a low reverence.

"Ah! you're a nice pair!" said Polly, as she tripped out—"sweet children, the two of you!"





CHAPTER IX.

THE FANCY BAZAAR.

ALDRINGHAM has received a shock. Some roving archæologist has written a malicious letter to the local papers, pointing out that the inhabitants of that thriving town are apparently not aware of the value of the treasure confided to them—that their magnificent church is being fast allowed to go to rack and ruin. The writer, after a long and learned antiquarian discourse, winds up by expressing his opinion that in no other town in England could the custodians of such a glorious specimen of church architecture have proved so unworthy of their trust, and stigmatizes the people generally as barbarians, lost to all sense of the beautiful and antique, who could allow such neglect of the grand old temple erected by their forefathers.

Aldringham chafes under the attack, the more restlessly because it is aware that the castigation is founded upon fact—that petty squabbles have for some time vexed the vestry meetings on the subject; that the rector's appeals have been a good deal pooh-poohed, and that much wrangling has for some time taken place about whose bounden duty it was to put his hand deep into his pocket concerning these repairs.

But now much angry controversy has arisen. Men have rushed unguardedly into print, and find, as usual.

that they have committed themselves much deeper than they dreamed of. They have written in their wrath, and said that, if that incompetent, incapable body, the vestry, would but do their duty, there was no lack of money, and that they, the writers, were good for various specified sums. The vestry had woke up, and resolved that Aldringham Church should be thoroughly restored; and the irritated correspondents of the local prints found that they were taken at their word.

To express indignation requires prudence; to put such feelings into writing, great discretion; but before you place them on record in print, I would advise you to think much of it. That cutting, sarcastic letter of yours appears so crushing till the rejoinder is read, and you never can measure your adversary's power of retort. He may be the stupidest man that ever lived, but it does not follow that he does not reckon a wicked pen amongst his friends and acquaintance. Once embarked in controversy in print, you can form no idea with whom you are contending, and fall into grievous error if you think that your battle lies with your acknowledged antagonist only.

Aldringham, having settled upon restoring its church, of course resorts to raising funds by every conceivable method. There were not wanting in Aldringham, any more than there are elsewhere, a class of people who look upon all such exigencies as a subject from which much diversion may be extracted—people who throw flowers around taxation, who pick your pockets in kid gloves, and help to levy the rate by various social impositions. There are many sources open to these pleasure-loving plunderers. You can have a ball, a flower-show, a bazaar, theatricals, &c., in aid and benefit of a church restoration fund—the latter, perhaps, the least productive of all, though by no means the least popular. Aldringham thought it would have a bazaar.

A very good notion this, and, worked with any ordinary judgment, certain to produce a profitable return. In Ireland, where it is thoroughly understood, it is the most poetic robbery the writer ever had the privilege of witnessing. They know something about it in the Canadas,

but in England the science is but imperfectly comprehended. Of course the two primary adjuncts are plenty of pretty women as stall-holders, and plenty of wandering bachelors to flirt with them. Don't mind the latter being impecunious, they will probably be far more lavish of their money than much richer men. I have seen an ensign, or briefless barrister, scatter the contents of his purse on such occasions in a way that would have made one of your county big-wigs stand aghast. It is true that you soon get to the end of the one, but then you perhaps never get to the beginning of the other. As for the trash and trumpery that go to furnish the stalls, there can never be much difficulty about accumulating that. To a large portion of the maidens of England, collecting for a fancy-fair is a species of mild excitement, and the occasion of much exaltation and exaggeration. They narrate wondrous fables of what their fingers have accomplished, and disparage each other's work with charming unanimity. Some backsliders among them, I know, buy, and fraudulently send the goods so acquired as the result of their labours. But then we all know the whole thing is a fraud from beginning to end, so what can it matter? In my natural indolence I cannot help siding with these ingenious sinners, and hath not Mr. Mortimer Collins told us that "to laze" is to live long?

It will, of course, be surmised that if Aldringham was to have a fancy-fair, it would be incumbent that Mr. Holbourne should be one of its managers. As the affair verged upon fructification, the banker as usual softly insinuated that he was the original promoter of the scheme.

"Un sot trouve toujours un plus sot qui l'admire,"

saith the French poet, and your social impostor is never without his worshippers. There was a considerable section of the town that quite took the worthy banker at his own valuation, and they, of course, were in ecstasies at the idea. His daughter and niece were enthusiastic on the subject. The managing, or manœuvring for the management of anything, had ever keen attraction for Marion. Here she was on the ladies committee, and in

her quiet, smooth way was probably the very goddess of discord in that assembly. She assented to every proposition, and was apparently the quietest, least obtrusive lady amongst them. But if Miss Langworthy went the length of gently deprecating any resolution that was come to, or even bending her delicate brows in silent disapproval thereof, so assuredly would a counter proposition be brought forward at the next meeting, be fiercely contested, and not improbably carried. Yet Marion was never a speaker on these occasions, nor did any proposition ever emanate from her. But Miss Langworthy was a real *artiste* in twisting people round her fingers.

To give an instance of Marion's talents. It had been somewhat sharply debated as to whether a post-office should be allowed or not; and there was evidently a strong feeling against it upon the part of the committee, composed, for the most part, of matrons and spinsters well stricken in years. Now, this particular avocation of post-mistress Marion had destined for herself from the commencement. But she said not a word in support of her scheme when she saw that the main body of the committee were against it, and voted with the majority that it should not be. But Miss Langworthy intended there should be a post-office, for all that. When the meeting broke up, she attached herself to a Mrs. Kennedy, who had been a moderate supporter of the post-office scheme, and walked away with her.

"My dear Mrs. Kennedy," said Marion, in her most mellifluous tones—and Marion was gifted with that sweetest of woman's attributes, a soft voice—"a girl like me cannot venture to pronounce an opinion amongst her seniors, but I do think that Mrs. Methringham treated your scheme about the post-office with scant courtesy to-day. As you said so justly at the time, it is a stall that is usually productive of considerable returns.

Now this was an ingenious perversion of what Mrs. Kennedy really had said. She, a doctor's wife, and somewhat blunt-spoken to boot, had observed in reality that "if any of the young ladies fancied managing such a gimcrack arrangement, she for her part did not see why they should not do so."

"I don't know about that, child," replied Mrs. Kennedy curtly, "but Margaret Methringham is not given to the display of much civility at the best of times."

That these two had a wholesome dislike to one another, of course Marion knew well.

"Still, Mrs. Kennedy, I don't think she was justified, after a lady of your standing on the committee had expressed herself so much in favour of the device," continued Miss Langworthy, "in saying that it was a senseless arrangement, and only led to an interchange of idle mock correspondence, by no means conducive to the good of anybody engaged in it."

This again was not exactly what Mrs. Methringham had said. Her observation in reality had been that "it was a rather senseless arrangement, and not likely to be conducive of much benefit to the object they were engaged in—promoting the funds for the restoration of the church."

"I am not going to be put down by Margaret Methringham," replied Mrs. Kennedy. "I don't see why a post-office should not bring in as much money as any other stall. But you—you little humbug! why, you voted against it yourself."

"I, Mrs. Kennedy! You don't call mine a vote, do you?" replied Marion, smiling. "I don't presume to have an opinion, I merely give my formal assent to what the majority approve; but I don't quite think that your proposition was allowed fair play to-day. Mrs. Methringham is a wee bit dictatorial at times, and a little overrides the rest of us. Good-bye."

If it had not been for Miss Langworthy, Mrs. Kennedy would never have given this post-office scheme another thought. But her eyes were now opened, and she resolved that Margaret Methringham should have her own way no longer.

Miss Langworthy paid a good many visits that week, and in every instance did she manage more or less to insinuate that Mrs. Methringham had treated the committee of which she was president with much discourtesy. At the next meeting, when Mrs. Kennedy, who had been chewing the cud of her wrath for a week, and fiercely

canvassing for support amongst her friends, moved that there should be a post-office, and that Miss Langworthy should preside thereat, two-thirds of the committee voted in support of her resolution, and Mrs. Kennedy enjoyed the ineffable satisfaction of feeling that she was not to be put down by Margaret Methringham, whatever that lady might think on the subject.

All this was pure enjoyment to Marion. She delighted in plotting, scheming, and counter-scheming. The fruit that could be had for the picking, however fine, lacked value in her eyes. Better far the unripe apricot, which had cost an afternoon to wheedle the gardener out of.

Grace, too, had entered thoroughly into this Bazaar affair. No thoughts such as racked her cousin's scheming brain troubled bonny Grace Holbourne. She cared not a wit whether she was to have a stall or not. But she was fain to confess that Aldringham was a little dull; the fancy fair was certain to bring people together, and then perhaps a dance or two might spring out of it. So Grace supported the movement with all her might, and worked, and begged, and bought all sorts of nicknacks, that could be of no possible use save to sell.

However, it was all settled now. Miss Langworthy, assisted by Grace, was to be post-mistress at the forthcoming Bazaar, and the two were now busy penning jesting epistles for every one of their acquaintance likely to be there, and nondescript notes that might be sent to suit such applicants as they had no previous knowledge of.

There can be no stall in a fancy-fair productive of such fun to the proprietors or crowd as the post-office, providing the managers thereof are young ladies of wit and *esprit*. I have known a young lady find a husband in the superintendence of such an establishment. He had never seen her before, but continued to ask for letters at sixpence apiece through two long Summer days; and posted answers to all of them, of course read by the proprietress, as if she had held office in the black-room of the post-office of the French empire. They knew each other passably well at the expiration of that two days' correspondence, and were married a few months afterwards.

It is the only system I know of that admits of pouring in a dozen odd love-letters *per diem*, and is a special dispensation of Providence for such as may be stricken by love at first sight.

But the eventful day has at length arrived—a delicious May morning heralds the opening of the Aldringham Fancy Fair. Grace is down, and flitting about the garden before breakfast, listening to the mellow whistle of the blackbird, or full song of the thrush; drinking in the soft balmy air, and gathering a bouquet of bright Sprink flowers, fresh as her own fair face! At last she trips through the drawing-room window, pauses there a moment to rout out some thread from her work-basket, wherewith to tie up her flowers, and then proceeds to the dining-room.

“Good morning, my father; here are violets for your button-hole,” she exclaims gaily as she enters. “Is not this a fit day on which to plunder the innocents? What, Marion not down, and she knowing how much we have yet to do! However, there is a bouquet for her all the same,” and Grace tossed the work of her deft fingers into her cousin’s plate.

“Thank you, my dear,” said Mr. Holbourne, as he placed the violets in his coat. “Yes, the weather is as perfect as the rest of our arrangements.” In his own mind, Mr. Holbourne had an undefined idea that the weather was in some degree his doing. “Most fortunate I succeeded in making them fix upon to-day. I assure you, Grace, I had great difficulty—there was a strong party who were all for postponing it till next week. Impossible to say *what* the weather may be *then*,” and Mr. Holbourne delivered the last sentence with an inflexion of voice that clearly indicated that there could be no doubt it would be bad.

“I am dreadfully late!” exclaimed Miss Langworthy, as she at last made her appearance. “Good morning, uncle. Thanks, Grace. How good of you to pick me such a charming nosegay! We must positively be off to the Corn Exchange as soon as we have swallowed our breakfast. We have got to arrange all our letters ready to our hands—in fact, to set our office in order.”

Once up, Marion was energetic enough, and speedily carried off both her cousin and her uncle to the scene of action.

Mr. Lowell laughingly tells us that "perhaps the noblest, as it is one of the most difficult of human functions, is getting Something (no matter how small) for Nothing." At a fancy fair the whole ingenuity of the man is engaged in the endeavour to obtain, in return for his money, not its worth—that would be absurd to expect—but something that it is possible to conceive may at some time be of use to him. The vocation of the lady stall-keepers, of course, is to plunder the male creature to the full extent of their capabilities, parting with as little of their useless goods as may be in pursuance of such design.

But it is, after all, not the legitimate traders—it is not the occupants of tables that perpetrate the greatest iniquities. The class that the hapless bachelor, involved in the dread whirlpool of a bazaar, cannot escape from, are the privateers—those bewitching young ladies that sail about the room, and insist upon your taking tickets for lotteries. I once asked a very pretty marauder of this kind, in my innocence, which was her stall; she flashed her bright eyes upon me for a moment, and then retorted, with a contemptuous pout, "I never take a stall—it is so slow! But if you think I can't make as much money as most of those that do, you are mistaken." I looked incredulous. "Ah! you don't believe me. Well, go and ask Kate Sherrington there how much she has taken this afternoon; she's a pretty girl, and not likely to let you even ask without exacting tithe. For me," and she laughed merrily, "I have these braces," flourishing a prettily-embroidered pair in my face. "I have raffled them six times, and I have them still, to say nothing of all but five pounds that they have brought me. You see," she continued, in a burst of confidence, "I never admit that my lottery is quite full, so I keep the two or three remaining tickets, and as I make out the lots, I, of course, always reserve the winning ticket for myself!"

The Aldringham Bazaar is in full swing—there is a band playing at one end of the room, and a refreshment-

stall is doing a brisk trade at the other. Bright and pretty look the gaily-dressed tables, brighter and prettier still, for the most part, the gaily-dressed damsels behind them. The post-office is a most decided success. Miss Langworthy has good taste, and it has been attractively fitted up; some of the letters, too, have been smartly penned, and provoke much laughter from their recipients. Business there, in short, is decidedly brisk, and it is rapidly buzzed about the room that you may obtain some fun there for sixpence. As you can obtain nothing else for that contemptible coin in the building, it were as well, perhaps, to try your luck in that direction. Miss Langworthy is in ecstasies. An ingeniously-worded letter to Robert Collingham has drawn forth a somewhat animated reply, and a call to know if there might not be another letter for him, which, of course, Marion hastily indites, and so the game goes on.

Presently a stranger lounges in front of the office, quietly puts down sixpence for postage, throws a letter through the window, and leisurely moves on. It is addressed to Miss Langworthy. Marion tears it open—she has received quite a score, of one kind or another, already, but certainly not one like this. It ran as follows:—

“A lady who can show such intelligence in the management of a mock post-office, probably dedicates her powers to the management, at times, of the more serious affairs of real life. It is possible she might, at some period, require the assistance of a confidential agent. Say for the obtaining of information about some subject, or about the doings of some person in whom she might be interested—their address, habits, mode of life, &c. The writer can be relied on, would be at all times happy to place himself at Miss Langworthy’s commands, and feels confident he should give satisfaction. An advertisement in the *Times* to Z, three asterisks, R, would at all times ensure attention.”

Marion gave this letter but little thought at the moment. It arrested her attention, and that was all; but instead of tearing it up, as she had the greater part of her correspondence, she thrust it into the pocket of her

dress, to bear company with one or two other notes that had tickled her fancy.

Now the writer of that note, as the reader will doubtless surmise, was no other than Mr. Lightfoot. If it should be deemed that that philosophical gentleman was imprudent in trusting himself so soon again in a town in which, to put it mildly, there might be supposed to exist considerable prejudice against him, I can only say that I have as yet scarcely succeeded in making known Mr. Lightfoot's transcendent talents. The Mr. Lightfoot of to-day could pretty confidently defy recognition as the Mr. Lightfoot of six months ago. The somewhat over-dressed gentleman, in a light overcoat, white hat, and flower in his button-hole, bore not a trace of resemblance to the sanctimonious philanthropist of last Winter. Mr. Lightfoot, in short, changed his skin much oftner than a snake. His appearance at the Aldringham Bazaar was the result of pure accident. Travelling on what he would have designated professional business, he suddenly found, as the Americans have it, that he had "missed connection," and had to wait some three hours at Aldringham before he could get on to London. Mr. Lightfoot accordingly strolled into the town, and seeing the flags flying in front of the Exchange, paid his shilling and went in. There was no saying but that something might turn up to benefit a man of his intelligence, when he found divers of his fellow-creatures employed in cajoling the public. Thanks to his previous visit to Aldringham, he knew all the leading inhabitants of the town by sight. It was part of the adventurer's business. He acquired that sort of knowledge about any place in which it might be his lot to spend a few days, from sheer habit. He was gifted with a most retentive memory, both for names and faces, and was an adept in drawing people on to talk.

There are, say the barristers, two styles of cross-examination, equally deadly in the hands of a master of that art. The one is quick, sharp, incisive, relentless, treating the witness much as a bull-terrier handles a rat, and literally shaking the truth out of him; the other insidious—the practitioner is quite friendly in manner,

he steals on his victim, he drops out his questions in the silkiest tones, as if compelled, for form's sake, to put these interrogatories, but really caring little what answer may be made him. His raised eyebrows and deprecating manner, when he has involved the witness in a mass of contradiction, are very pretty comedy to gaze upon, as also is the ingenious manner in which he apparently seeks to assist his floundering victim's treacherous memory. Had Mr. Lightfoot been brought up a barrister, he would have shown himself a proficient as a cross-examiner of the latter type.

Like most men who live by their wits, Mr. Lightfoot was a very shrewd physiognomist. He had been somewhat struck with Marion's keen, clever face as he stood idly watching the post-office. He knew who she was perfectly—why her face attracted him he could hardly have told you, but as he stood there, listless and musing, it did flash across him that that girl's life was likely to run out of the ordinary groove. Inspired with this idea, it suddenly occurred to him that the time might come when she would want a clever and unscrupulous coadjutor. Some of his most successful forays on the public had been due to the following up of similar flights of imagination. He was essentially a man of impulse and great imaginative faculty. He was especially fond of wild speculations based on slenderest foundation, and could narrate really marvellous stories of how he had profited much by transactions apparently quite as irrelevant as the present. Under these circumstances, Mr. Lightfoot penned the aforesaid note. I don't suppose he muttered, as he leisurely took his way back to the station, "that anything will come of it; but if you set no trimmers, you will catch no fish, that is perfectly clear. You never can have too many night-lines down; and I have taken very fine gudgeon in my day with hooks no better baited than this."

Mr. Lightfoot had fallen into one slight error in his calculations—he knew Mr. Holbourne was wealthy, he knew Miss Langworthy was his niece, and he therefore concluded she must also have plenty of money. Had he known the true state of affairs, that note had probably

never been written, and two or three things had turned out differently in this veracious history.

Mr. Holbourne is radiant this afternoon—he condescendingly extends his two fingers in all directions, and surveys the throng through his double eye-glass with the utmost benignity; he imparts graciously to several of his intimates that it was he who fixed upon the day for the Bazaar, and insinuates that he had been guided to that decision by abstruse meteorological calculation. “Pretty idea, the post-office—yes, I thought we should succeed there,” he replies to some one who addresses him somewhat enthusiastically about that department. “It took a little thinking out, but it has proved worth the trouble, has it not?” And Mr. Holbourne smiles genially, and looks as if that also is due to his inspiration.

“A letter for Miss Holbourne, and sixpence to pay on it!” exclaims a good-looking, gentlemanly man, suddenly appearing in front of the window, and holding up a note between his fingers.

“Quite contrary to rule,” laughed Marion, who happened to be there. “You must pay sixpence to post it.”

“But you see,” continued the stranger, smiling, “I claim sixpence for bringing it. It is all one to me—if Miss Holbourne won’t pay for her letter, I must take it back, that is all.”

“I am afraid you don’t understand the principles on which this establishment is conducted,” retorted Marion, rather amused.

“Perfectly,” replied the stranger—“on the general shearing of the innocents. But now comes one of the black sheep, who refuses to be shorn. Here’s a letter Miss Holbourne must pay for if she would have it.”

“No connection with any branch business,” replied Marion, laughing; “but I’ll take it in for nothing if you will affirm you cannot pay postage.”

“Not so. We are no bankrupts yet in our concern, but strict, business-like people, looking sharply after our just dues. Give me my sixpence, and take you my trust.”

“Never!” cried Marion. “It would be a precedent that might ruin us. But here is the lady concerned.”

"Ah! you are not Miss Holbourne, then," said the stranger. "I commend your prudence, lady fair. The paying of other people's postage is a pernicious practice, and has involved the loss of small change from time immemorial. But," he continued, laughing, "what says Miss Holbourne herself? Will she ransom her letter?"

"Don't be beguiled, Grace!" cried Miss Langworthy, her eyes sparkling with fun. "He has too shrewd a tongue for young tradeswomen like us to cope with!"

"Only sixpence, Miss Holbourne. A letter from him, perchance, who is 'dearest of any,' and you hesitate. Are the maidens of England grown so mercenary that they take in no love-letters unless they are pre-paid?"

"You exceed your privilege, sir," said Grace quietly. "I know not by what right you assume that my letter is of that description."

"Pardon," replied the stranger, "I do but guess. Still it is as yet not your letter, since you have not paid for it. Is this poor epistle destined to go the dead letter office?"

"Give it to me."

"Not without payment. Listen. I am pledged not to part with this note unless I receive what I demand. The writer vowed that, if I attended the fair, I should sell, not buy. For the last time, Miss Holbourne, will you have it?" And as he spoke he extended the letter towards Grace in such a manner that she could see the address clearly.

Her eyes flashed for a moment, and then she held forth the required sixpence.

"There," she said quietly, "You show scant courtesy in exacting tribute for doing a lady service."

"May you never be worse served, Miss Holbourne," replied the stranger, bowing low as he handed her the missive. "This coin must be preserved *in memoriam*," he said, laughing, as he dropped it into a separate compartment of his purse, "that I in my day did once despoil the spoilers." And raising his hat, he passed on, and was seen no more.

Miss Langworthy's attention had been taken up by

other customers, and the termination of the scene escaped her.

Thrusting the note into the bosom of her dress somewhat hurriedly, Grace turned her attention once more to the duties of assistant post-mistress.





CHAPTER X.

THE BETROTHAL.

MARION LANGWORTHY, in the privacy of her bed-chamber, runs her eye carelessly over those few letters that she had put upon one side, during the afternoon's turmoil, as worthy of a second perusal. She laughs over them, then tears them into small pieces and throws them into the empty grate. The last of the little packet is Mr. Lightfoot's mysterious note. She reads this attentively, half tears it across, then stops.

"No," she murmurs, "I'll keep this. If it is genuine, it may at some time be useful to know of such a person." And so saying, Marion locks it up in her desk, and betaking herself to her pillow, sleeps the sleep of the righteous.

Not so her cousin, who is much perturbed by the *billet* she purchased after such controversy. Of course Grace had recognised her lover's handwriting on the superscription, and though filled with amazement at what could have induced him to write to her by such a channel, no longer doubted that the stranger was right, and that it behoved her to have that note at any cost. Grace paces her room lost in thought. She has no hesitation about fulfilling the task which Charlie has confided to her; the only question is how to do so satisfactorily. He tells her that he has come down for the express purpose of seeing his sister, "and it is you, Grace, that must

manage this meeting for me. Surely you can contrive to go over and lunch at Churton, and in the course of the afternoon persuade Sylla to walk up to the Hazel Copse. It was a very favourite haunt of hers in the old days, and if you propose it, she is not likely to say you nay. Unless my father should be at home and accompany you, the rest would then be easy. I am staying at Donerby, six miles away, but shall be watching the Hazels from three to six to-morrow afternoon."

Now, Charlie Collingham's programme read simple enough; but then, you see, he overlooked the existence of Miss Langworthy. It was quite easy to order the carriage and drive over to lunch at Churton, providing Marion did not want the carriage to go somewhere else in. And in such divergence of interests Grace knew from past experience that the case would probably go against herself. Then again, providing that difficulty was overcome, who should say that Marion would not volunteer to accompany her on her visit? It was true Miss Langworthy did not much affect Churton Manor. She pleaded utter inability to get on with its blind mistress, and there was little doubt that the distaste was mutual. Still Marion did visit there at times, and it might be that she would take advantage of the morrow's opportunity. Grace puzzled her little head about these points for some time, but was at last fain to admit that she must simply wait to see how things might turn out.

"Well, Gracie!" exclaimed her cousin, when they met next morning, "you never told me about your letter. Was it worth the postage?—for I saw you did buy it at last."

"Yes, I gave that pertinacious man his sixpence in the end," replied Miss Holbourne, toying with her tea-spoon. "It was the only way to get rid of him."

"That's no answer, Grace. Who was it from? Was it from anyone you know? What was it about? Was it fun?"

"No, it was not fun. It was from somebody I know, but nothing that would amuse you in any way."

"I could tell you more about that if I saw it," replied Miss Langworthy, quietly.

"Ah! yes, but then, you see, Marion, I'm not going to show it you," returned Grace, laughing. "I got my love letters as well as you yesterday. We must keep each her own counsel on those points."

"Excuse my indiscretion," replied Marion. "I thought it was probably a facsimile of half a dozen we laughed over together yesterday, or I should not of course have alluded to it." And Miss Langworthy eyed her cousin keenly as she spoke.

"And now you are probably making the equal mistake of attributing more importance to it than you need. However, never mind my letter. What are you thinking of doing this afternoon?"

"Well, I feel rather tired after yesterday's business, and have some letters to write. Two very fair excuses for an idle day."

"I meditate driving over to lunch with Sylla Collingham," said Grace, as calmly as she could. "Will you come?"

"Lunch at Churton! The drive would do one good; I don't know but that I may."

Grace's heart died away. Her worst fears were about to be realised. Should Marion accompany her, then goodbye to Charlie's scheme. But as Miss Langworthy reflected upon the proposed arrangement, it occurred to her that the only object of interest she had at Churton was the presence of Robert Collingham, and she could hardly call to mind an instance of ever encountering him during a morning visit there. She had not the slightest sympathy with Miss Collingham, and had a distinct idea of having been generally a good deal bored upon such occasions, so that at length to her cousin's intense relief, she observed—

"No, I think you must go alone, Gracie; on second thoughts, I don't feel equal to making talk to Sylla Collingham to-day. She and I never amalgamate very cleverly at the best of times; and then I detest that horrid dog!"

"So one o'clock saw Miss Holbourne on her way to Churton, in the highest possible spirits. The sun shone bright, the trees and hedges were clothed in all the

emerald tints of Spring, the snowy blossom of the thorn perfumed the air, the birds were chorussing the advent of the approaching Summer in strains of sweetest melody. It was one of those glorious May-days that send the blood tumultuously through the veins, when it is a pleasure simply to be alive, and one could sing pæans from mere ecstasy of existence. With the most difficult part of her task accomplished, and all the exhilaration of spirits produced by her drive, small wonder that Miss Holbourne descended from her carriage at the door of Churton Manor high of heart, and feeling equal to any emergency.

As she alighted, a magnificent Scotch colly, that was lying blinking in the sunshine, rose, stretched himself, and then walked deliberately forward to meet her.

"What, Dandy!" said Grace, as she bent to caress him. "Here alone, my man?—why, where's your mistress?"

The dog looked up at her, wagged his tail, and then led the way indoors.

"He understands you, miss," said the old butler smiling. "There's little need for me to interfere when Dandy takes it into his head to receive visitors to Miss Sylla; but he's curious in his likes and dislikes, and won't do it for everyone. I think you're a favourite of his, miss."

"Yes, Simmonds; Dandy and I are old friends—are we not, my dog?"

Dandy turned round, wagged his tail, and trotted on.

"That'll do, Simmonds," said Grace. "Miss Sylla's in the library, I suppose? You can leave Dandy to take care of me now."

The dog, meanwhile, looking round on the threshold of the room to see that the visitor was close behind him, pushed open the unlatched door, ran across to his mistress, placed his paws upon her lap, nuzzled his nose into her face, giving forth a low whimper as he did so, then scampered back towards Grace as she entered, and finally, once more returning, thrust his nose into Sylla's hand.

"Who is it?" enquired Miss Collingham. "Dandy tells me a great friend, and Dandy never tells stories. Ah! I think I know," she continued, as she rose and

advanced a few steps to meet her visitor. "It's you, Grace, is it not?"

"Yes," replied Miss Holbourne, as she clasped her hostess's hand and kissed her. "I have come over to lunch, and spend a long afternoon with you, if you will have me."

"You know I will—only too glad," returned Miss Collingham as she resumed her seat. But are you all alone Gracie! I don't hear anyone else."

"All by myself. Yours to gossip with, ramble with, or do what you will with for the next four hours."

"Ah! that is charming. We must feed you first, and then you shall talk to me, play to me, and be eyes to me all the rest of the afternoon. I want to hear all about the Bazaar, and half a hundred things besides."

Luncheon was here announced, and, rather to Grace's consternation, Sir John put in his appearance thereat.

"Ah! my god-daughter, delighted to see you," exclaimed the Baronet, as he shook hands with her. "You ingenious monkey, what an opportunity you gave the young men yesterday! There she was, in her most killing bonnet, looking her prettiest, Sylla, and giving out that any gentleman in the room might write to her for sixpence! Did you ever hear of such a brazened challenge to flirtation? I suppose a barrow wouldn't carry your letters home in the evening, would it, child?"

"Ah! Sir John, I should like to have been one of the *belles* of your day," replied Grace, laughing. "A pretty woman was a power in the land in those times. The young men don't get very enthusiastic about us now, even when we look our nicest, and have on our best bonnets. I carried my letters home in mine own hands, without much trouble, last night."

"Shame on the youth of Aldringham!" cried the Baronet, laughing. "Let me give you some wine to support you, girl, under such sad confession. Don't you think, Sylla, she's mystifying us just a little?"

"I think, my father, she means keeping her own secrets—at all events, from you. What I may wheedle out of her presently there's no knowing."

"Can you stay and dine, Grace?" inquired the Baronet.

"Thanks; no, Sir John. I am going to pass the afternoon with Sylla, but must get home to dinner."

"Well, then, I shall leave you two to have a 'crack,' as the Scotch say. Sorry you can't stay, but daresay I shall see you again before you go." And, to Grace's great delight, the Baronet took his departure.

Left to themselves, the two girls speedily retreated to Sylla's own room—a cosy sanctum, with a bed-chamber off it, looking out upon the garden—and there Grace told her friend all the gossip of the country, played to her the newest music she had got hold of, and sang her the last song or two that she had obtained from London. Sylla, with her delicate ear, half catches up these airs, and is still trying one upon the piano, when Grace suggests that they ought to go out for a little, such a delicious afternoon.

"Yes, we will directly, but I should like to catch this first. Play it over for me once more, won't you?"

So Grace again rattles off "*The Sabre of my Sire.*" Very sweet to the darkness-stricken girl are such visits as these. So many monotonous hours as she is doomed to pass alone, can you not conceive the sunshine that a call from Grace is to her existence? Ere her illness Sylla had been devoted to music, and gave promise of much talent. These half-caught airs will wile away many an hour in trying to thoroughly master them, and Sylla passes a good deal of time at her piano, even now.

"There," said Grace, as she finished, "I am sure you have it now; and if not, I must come over and give you another lesson; for we must positively go out and get a little sunshine—eh, Dandy, man, what do you say?"

The dog was on his feet in an instant, and gave a little yelp of pleasure.

"Ah! trust Dandy to back you up," said Sylla, laughing; "He is always for decoying me out on a fine day. No, sir, I shan't want your arm to-day," she continued, as the dog thrust his nose into her hand—"Grace will take care of me. Forward, my man."

Attached to his collar, and at present coiled round his neck, Dandy wore a short cord. When away from the house, his mistress often availed herself of this, and

the dog would lead her safely almost anywhere. He had originally belonged to her brother Charlie, and he it was who had first drilled Dandy in his duties. Dandy speedily recognised his responsibilities, and now was seldom far from his mistress. He watched over her with jealous care, and was ever at her side if she left the house. She had merely to take hold of his cord and tell him where she wanted to go, and to any of her accustomed haunts the dog would guide her carefully and surely. He seemed thoroughly to comprehend the names of such places as she habitually frequented, and had even piloted her safely to the adjoining village; but on a repetition of this excursion Sir John put his veto when he heard of it, deeming that Dandy might not, with all his intelligence, give carts or carriages a sufficiently wide berth, and that he bore no immunity from the assaults of strangers of his kind.

They pace through the garden, in which Grace pauses a moment to gather some flowers for her friend; then crossing the ha-ha, they stroll into the park. Dandy, perfectly aware that he may consider himself off duty till such time as he should hear the silver whistle that dangles from his mistress's watch-chain, dedicates his energies to shepherding the rabbits, chasing them from their seats in the fern to their burrows with much vivacity and satisfaction. The squirrels rather trouble his mind; he evidently considers that they also ought to disappear underground when pursued, and their persistency in taking to trees there can be no doubt, from his indignant bark, he regards as contumacious and perverse behaviour on their part.

"Let us go up to the Hazels, Sylla," said Grace at length.

"Why the Hazels?" exclaimed Miss Collingham. "I seldom go there now. I used to go there so often when dear Charlie was at home. They conjure up such pleasant recollections, that it makes me sad to think they should be but memories. No, let us walk somewhere else."

"Not so. Charlie has talked to me so much about those old days in the Hazels, when he used first to wheel

you up there in your chair after your illness, 'that I want to see them."

"Be it so, Gracie. Ah, that those days could come again!"

From which conversation it may be gathered that Sylla had a very fair inkling of how things stood between her brother and Miss Holbourne.

"Those times will come again, if we only wait. But where are the Hazels, Sylla?—for I don't know."

"Let me think. I have not been attending to the way we've come much. Where are we? There should be a big clump of Spanish chestnuts, and the kitchen-gardens beyond them to our right, if I do not mistake."

"That's all as you say," replied Grace.

"Well, then, do you see a hazel-crowned knoll about half a mile to your left, just outside the park?"

"Yes—all bathed in golden light just now."

"That is the Hazels—if you can't make it out now I shall have to whistle for Dandy. It's long since we've been there, but I'll be bound he recollects it."

"I think we shall manage without him," said Miss Holbourne, as she directed her own and companion's steps to the point indicated.

Some ten minutes more or so and Grace's task is finished. She and Sylla are sitting on the soft velvety turf, embowered midst the fringe of bright green hazel bushes that surround the summit of the knoll. A silence comes over them. Miss Collingham sinks languidly backward on the grass, as if tired, and Grace's brown eyes dreamily drink in the landscape beneath her, while her thoughts are busy as to the effects of the impending meeting upon her friend. Dandy, tired of scampering about, has stretched himself at his mistress's feet, his black muzzle resting on his tan-coloured paws. A quarter of an hour nearly has elapsed; Sylla is all but asleep, while Grace becomes nervously anxious for the *dénouement*. Not a sound but the singing of the birds or far-off bleating of the sheep breaks the stillness. Not a sign is there of Charlie. Grace looks at her watch, which points to half-past four. Suddenly Dandy raises his head, then once more stretches his nose upon his fore

paws; but the girl notices that, whereas before his bright-brown eyes were closed, they are now wide open, keen, and restless. A second time he raises his head and pricks his small black ears, while the quivering and dilation of his nostrils clearly indicate that he is aware of a strange presence in their neighbourhood. He is sitting up on his haunches by this, and sniffing anxiously around. Not satisfied apparently, he gives vent to a sound, half growl, half bark, and then plunges into the cover. The noise rouses Miss Collingham. "What is it, Dandy?" she exclaims carelessly. "All but asleep, Gracie; I think it's getting time to go home and look for some tea."

But at this juncture Dandy crashes back again through the bushes, jumps up on his mistress, thrusts his nose into her face, gives vent to low whimpers of delight, and then once more disappears at a gallop midst the hazels.

"Who is it?" inquired Sylla breathlessly, while her pale cheeks grew paler still. "The dog tells me as plainly as if he spoke that some one dear to me is at hand—quick, Grace, who is it?" and in her excitement the girl started to her feet. Another second, and she clutched Grace's arm convulsively, as the faint sound of some one forcing his way through the cover fell upon their ears. "Is it?—is it?" she muttered; but ere she could conclude her sentence, Charlie Collingham burst through the bushes, caught her in his arms, and kissing her, said:

"Sylla, darling, at last I see you again!"

She lay quite passive in his embrace. So still indeed, and so white were her cheeks, that her brother thought she had fainted. His quick dark eyes glanced over to Grace, and she made answer to their mute interrogatory.

"Don't be frightened, Charlie. She's not gone off, though your appearance has been rather a shock to her. She'll be herself directly."

And in a few minutes Sylla was seated on the turf, holding her brother tight by the hand, and gurgling forth a flood of slightly hysterical questions. Gradually her excitement subsided, and she was able to converse rationally with him. But, in the egotism of her felicity, she had forgotten Grace.

Sylla, my child," exclaimed Charlie at length, "you forget that there is some one here whom you have not allowed me even to shake hands with as yet, and she has strong claim to be remembered, too, sister mine."

"Ah, me! how selfish I am; but you'll forgive me, Grace, won't you? It's so long since I've had him to prate too—so long since," she repeated mournfully, "I have heard his voice or clasped his hands."

"Come and sit here, Gracie, on the other side of me, and help me to instil a little common-sense into this foolish girl, who is in danger of losing her head because her good-for-nothing brother has turned up again. What do you think I came down here for, Sylla, to-day?"

"To see me, Charlie," she replied, as she nestled closer to his side: "and—and," she faltered, as a jealous pang shot through her breast, "to see Grace."

"Yes, dearest, to see you and Grace together, and tell you that you must learn to love her as a sister, for such I hope she will be to you before very long."

"Sylla, don't believe him!" cried Grace, as her face flushed, and her eyes flashed maliciously up at her lover. "He has never asked my consent as yet."

"Not perhaps exactly in words," returned Collingham; "but I think you require but little assurance on that point. Gracie, you've known for months that I have been as much pledged to you as if those words had been spoken. Let Sylla join our hands now."

There was but little of the coquette in Grace. After a moment's hesitation she stretched forth her hand, and Sylla's slender fingers encircled the clasped palms of the lovers.

"It is what I could have most wished," said Sylla, in low tones, after a short pause. "But I doubt whether our father or Grace's will approve of it."

"What matter, you small bird of ill-omen? So I have Grace's consent, I care little. It will be for me to clear the stones from our path; and I have no fear on that subject. Gracie can trust me?" and he looked anxiously into his betrothed's face.

Miss Holbourne said nothing; but the frank, confiding smile with which she returned her lover's glance was more eloquent than words.

"Let me see if you are changed, Charlie," said Sylla, gently; and as she spoke her delicate hand ran lightly over his face, paused for a second lovingly midst his dark crisp hair, and then dropped quietly into her lap once more.

"Not a whit," she said softly—"still the same dear old Charlie."

Dandy's behaviour is worthy of commemoration. At first he did nothing but yap, whimper, and career wildly round the two, occasionally rushing up, to thrust his nose now into one hand, then into another. But after a little it dawned upon his canine mind that he was in some way committed to a conspiracy—that this was an illicit meeting. From that moment, he was clothed in the mantle of discretion. Betaking himself to a commanding position, he sat down upon his haunches, and with vigilant eyes and pricked ears, kept watch and ward over his companions.

"Well, it's time I was going," said Charlie, at length. "It's been a gala afternoon for me, but I must be back in London to-night. Good-bye, sister, dearest; you will hear about me from Gracie often now. Adieu, my own," he continued, audaciously clasping Miss Holbourne in his arms, and snatching a tribute from her lips. Then, quickly releasing her, looking so pretty in her blushes and sweet confusion, that it was almost pitiable to think there should be none to see her, Charlie disappeared amidst the bushes.



CHAPTER XI.

BEFORE THE STORM.

REGINALD HOLBOURNE, meanwhile, is sauntering, for the second time in his life, through "love's young dream." He can no longer even impose upon himself about still retaining affection for his *fiancée*. The scales have fallen from his eyes. He knows now that he loves Lettice, and that it is impossible for him to wed Marion. But although he passes many golden hours in the presence of the object of his passion, do not think that he suffers from no reaction to such lotus-eating.

Reginald Holbourne is a man of high but weak character. Such usually suffer much in their journey through life. They elect an exalted standard by which to shape their course. They set up for themselves a code of strictest honour, infringement of which occasions them agonies of self-abasement. These weak characters perpetually yield—yield only after a painful struggle—to temptation. They suffer from paroxysms of self-accusation and self-upbraiding before their fall; they are tortured with remorse, their sin at last accomplished. Reginald, in his own eyes, cannot break with Marion without dire stain occurring to his scutcheon. It must be borne in mind that he is not behind the scenes as we are; that he still looks upon it that he won this girl's love as an heiress; that when her loss of fortune was

made known to her, she chivalrously restored to him his troth, which he answered by a voluntary renewal of his vows; and, lastly, though conscious that his own love is dead, he still believes that Marion loves him in a sober fashion.

He is quite aware, too, what injustice he is being guilty of with regard to Lettice. Child as she is, she makes no attempt to disguise her love, which shines out of her eyes frank and innocent. She appeals to him now upon all occasions. Her sweet face is covered with smiles and tell-tale blushes when he praises her, clouded and troubled should his words be harsh. She is so proud and pleased when he takes her out for a walk, slips her little hand within his arm in such a flutter of delight, and prattles in his ear all the time, as birds sing in Spring-time, from mere exhilaration and ecstasy. As the season draws on Reginald encounters more acquaintances than he could wish. He becomes aware that the men thereof look with a half curious stare of admiration at Lettice; that there is a slight twitch about the corners of their mouths, and that his companion calls forth comment, the gist of which he guesses pretty accurately. He grinds his teeth at such *contretemps*. The ladies of his acquaintance, moreover, are wont to be more short-sighted than usual, when Lettice is upon his arm. Quietly and neatly dressed as she ever is, with all the sweet purity and modesty of her girlhood irradiating her face, yet it is palpable to those who know Reginald Holbourne that this fair companion of his is not of his own class. Those who know the world, and are well aware with what small amount of charity and upon what slight evidence it draws its conclusions, will see little to wonder at in all this.

It was gall to Reginald. He loved this girl purely and passionately. He could but see that already men were regarding her as his mistress. He argued sophistically to himself that no word of love had ever as yet escaped his lips. He declined to picture to himself what his eyes, his manner, his voice, had told times without number. And yet it was with a thrill of exultation he felt that Lettice's heart was entirely his own. He wanted no con-

firmation of this, although he thought at times how delicious it would be to draw the avowal from her own glowing lips. There were times when his passion all but mastered him, and he had hard matter to restrain himself from clasping her in his arms, and letting loose the flood-gates of his love. How sweet would it be, "leaning cheek to cheek," to flatter forth such confession! Then he foamed and fumed that men should dare regard his goddess in the light he but too surely recognised they did. He was furious at the idea that Lettice's fair fame should be smirched. Yet it did not occur to him to break up their existing relations. To seek other lodgings, to sever himself from the girl he professed to love, but on whom he knew he was casting such a stain by his imprudence as woman can seldom live down.

And she, poor child, saw nothing of all this. She hardly as yet recognised that she loved. She knew that his presence made sunshine—his absence shade; that praise or kind words from him constituted happiness; that his displeasure made her sad—ay, sadder than such chiding seemed due warranty for. She never pictured to herself, as yet, any change in their relations. It seemed quite natural to her that things should go on as they did at present; that he should read to her, lend her books, and sometimes take her out for delicious walks. Little likely that a child such as she should dream that the world might view their proceedings with a jaundiced eye. Of late, Reginald had favoured country excursions. These were Elysium to Lettice. To scamper up Hampstead Hill with him—to go down to Hampton, and wander through Bushy Park, to tread the soft velvety turf, and see the grand horse-chestnuts in all their glory; then come home tired and delighted, and muse upon her day's enjoyment.

And so Lettice continued her dream, with eyes as yet blind to its consequences; while Reginald, only too conscious of what might come of it, argued sophistically with himself, upbraided himself, but made no effort to break through the web he was so assuredly weaving.

As for old Mr. Cheslett, since his attack he had been but feeble, both in mind and body. He seemed to take

it quite as a matter of course that his granddaughter should go about under Reginald's escort, and vouchsafed no word of counsel to the motherless girl. He seemed to take but little interest in anything but the weather and his meals. If the day was fine, he sauntered up to the Regent's Park, and sat there in the sun. The Zoological Gardens were a source of much amusement to him—indeed, I think Reginald became a "Fellow" about this time, for the mere purpose of providing him with free admissions.

Parsimony had almost developed into the passion of avarice with him of late, and one thing which caused him to view Reginald with much favour, was the numberless presents he made them of country produce, such as fresh butter, eggs, chickens, etc. The young man often received a hamper from Aldringham with such freight, as a lift to his bachelor *ménage*, the contents of which, in great measure, went now to the strengthening of the Cheslett commissariat.

"Mr. Holbourne, you're too bad, and too good," said Lettice, laughing, as she let him in one afternoon, on his return from the City. "Too bad to rob yourself so disgracefully as you have, and too good to send us such a magnificent contribution to our larder as you did this morning."

"Was your grandfather pleased, Lettice?" inquired Reginald, smiling.

"Yes! and I am pleased a little, and displeased a little, but shall be altogether pleased if you'll promise to come and help to eat your own chickens to-night. You will, won't you?" she said, softly.

"Yes, if you like it, and Mr. Cheslett won't object."

"Ah! that's good of you. I had vowed, if you would not, that no chicken should pass my lips to-night. I should have had to dine upon bread-and-butter. See what a quandary you have got me out of!"

"You're a foolish child, Lettice," replied Holbourne, laughing.

"Not so, my lord—not so!" cried the girl, merrily. "I have you and chickens to my dinner to-night. An you but bring your best humour with you, we will make a cheerful meal of it."

Lettice sometimes affected, in her mirth, the language of those old dramatists of whom she had heard so much from her grandfather.

Very pretty did she look that evening doing the honours of her simple table, albeit she wore but a neat print dress; but then it fitted her to perfection, and a bright blue ribbon at her throat, and another of the same hue gleaming amongst her luxurious dark tresses, served her for ornaments,

"Wine, Lettice, we want more wine," said Mr. Cheslett, as the dinner came to a conclusion. "Most excellent chicken, Mr. Holbourne. I tender you thanks, sir, for the same.

" 'Now am I

 In mine own conceit a monarch ;—at the least
Arch-president of the boiled, the roast, the baked.

If man, who has but the mere ordering of the feast, may say that, how much more warrant has he who has fed and grown fat thereon ! "

Grandpapa Cheslett waxed garrulous under the influence of the good cheer. He pushed the bottle about in a way that not only astonished Reginald, but made Lettice stare with amazement. He told various stories, and told them, too, with considerable spirit. He chuckled immensely over an anecdote of Lettice's childish days—of how, upon one occasion, he had found her most intently occupied upon sweeping out the sitting-room; how he had volunteered to bring her a brush and dust-pan from town, and asked if she would not be pleased with them; how Lettice thanked him gravely, and then added, "And, grandpapa, if you could only bring me a good lot of dirt, too, it would be such fun."

Lettice laughed, and declared that this was a bit of invention upon Mr. Cheslett's part; but the old gentleman, with much merriment, asseverated that his story was true. Then Mr. Cheslett relapsed into an easy-chair, and, when coffee was brought in, requested Reginald to light his cigar.

"I don't smoke myself, sir," he said, "but I don't mind it; and as for the child there, she's not old enough yet to know rightly what she likes and what she doesn't."

Ah ! Grandpapa Cheslett, you make a great mistake there. She may be young, but she has learnt not only to like, but to love. The old, old lesson is to be understood at sixteen very perfectly. Plants bloom early at times, and in the tropics maidens have "serious affairs" ere they enter their teens. Even in our more northern climates parents and guardians are occasionally startled by the precocity of their charges in such matters. Lettice was a girl who had stood alone from an early age. Such naturally are driven to think for themselves. Children under these circumstances, develop rapidly. They occasionally awake to the simultaneous knowledge that they have a heart, and have lost it. Lettice is not as yet quite aware of this fact. She never attempts to analyse her feelings towards Reginald, but she is perfectly well satisfied to sit in the window with him, as she is doing to-night, carrying on a desultory conversation in a low voice, while her grandfather enjoys his after-dinner nap. There is so little said, apparently, in such talk. The topics may be so common-place, but who can describe the glance, the tone, that invest these nothings with so much significance. No word of love may pass the lips. That conversation might be published to the world, and very vapid and uninteresting would the world deem it. Yet how sweet it was ! How much those common-place observations conveyed to our ears ! Common-place, forsooth ! Not when uttered in those low, tremulous tones, with those liquid eyes stealing a timid upward glance at our own.

So they two sat looking out at the hot Summer night over the dusty street, their whispering conversation almost hushed, the silence broken only by the occasional rattle of a cab, the voice of some passer-by, or the gentle trumpeting of Grandpapa Cheslett's nose ; yet who would deem that they held no commune, that their hearts throbbed not fiercely, that their pulses beat not unsteadily ? Strong passions run ever silently. It is the babbling love that lacks strength. Those who shriek forth their hate or vengeance are little to be dreaded. The deep, silent stream it is that, when it bursts its banks, carries such havoc and desolation before it. It is the long

and sternly-repressed passion that is charged with such weal or such woe to the object of its love or its hatred.

Reginald's lips tremble more than once with the wild speech that so nearly escapes them. The strong white teeth at times bite through the cigar, as he desperately gulps down the words that he can barely refrain from giving vent to. But no; he has determined that he will not wrong this girl by filling her ears with his passion, while he is pledged to another; so he smokes on in silent tempestuous manner, and solaces himself with the hypocritical reflection that he is not making love to Lettice. There is much notable love-making done with little converse, and fluency of tongue has nipped many a promising flirtation.

And Lettice is quite satisfied to sit there beside him and dream. It is enough for her to have him all to herself this sultry evening, and fill up the silence with the imaginings of her girlish heart. She feels no anxiety that he should express himself more clearly—no perturbation that she is on the eve of a *dénouement*. She is quite content with things as they are. She has not as yet learnt to look upon him as a lover; she has not yet admitted to herself that she loves. A word from him—an accident of circumstance—might cause the scales to fall from her eyes at any moment. But the word is not as yet spoken; the circumstance has not as yet occurred.

Suddenly some big plashes of rain fall on the pavement, and the low growling of the long-threatening storm meets the ear.

"Time to close the window, little one!" exclaims Reginald, "and for good people like you and me to go to bed."

"Ah, yes," she replies. "It has been a pleasant evening, but a storm finishes many such."

"What do you mean?" asked Reginald.

"Nothing. I don't know—yes, I do—I mean that some of life's sunniest days are succeeded by some of life's fiercest storms. Unfair, Mr. Holbourne," she continued, smiling, "to cross-examine me so closely!"

An ominous clap of thunder followed her remark,

which roused Mr. Cheslett from his slumbers, and seemed to Reginald like a weird commentary on her speech. He bade them good night somewhat abruptly, and as he ascended towards his own rooms, bethought himself musingly whether these sunny days he had been of late enjoying might not be but the presage of fell, tempestuous times, both to himself and Lettice.





CHAPTER XII.

ROBERT COLLINGHAM'S COURTSHIP.

GRADUALLY a rumour stole through Aldringham that Reginald Holbourne was engaged to be married—arising, as such vague stories will, from sources not precisely traceable; growing in strength as it spread, and receiving much embellishment as it travelled from tongue to tongue; confirmation waxing stronger day by day as the lively imaginations of the narrators of the fable filled in the details. By the end of the week it began to settle down, and Aldringham generally believed that Reginald was about to present his father with a daughter-in-law, wooed from the boards of a suburban theatre. To these good people such a marriage was deemed no fit subject of gratulation. They pitied Mr. Holbourne from their hearts, and considerably refrained from felicitating him on his son's engagement. Of course it was quite impossible that Reginald could bring such a light-o'-love into the bosom of his own family. Miss Langworthy and her sister were not likely to tolerate such dishonour as the receiving an actress to their hearth; and the banker the last man in the world to bear such desecration of his home. Aldringham had its own puritanical views of the sisters of the buskin, and held them in little esteem; an opinion based, like many other strong prejudices in this world, upon sheer theory and complete ignorance of the class it so emphatically

condemned. It was therefore but natural, under the circumstances, that Mr. Holbourne and his family were the last people to hear that of which all Aldringham was just now talking.

Reginald's engagement to his cousin was a thing known only to Grace, and had never of late been even suspected by the townspeople. True, there had been a time when their names had been for a little coupled by the gossips of the place, but such rumour had long since died away, and therefore operated as no check upon the later scandal.

After a little, this story reached the ears of Sir John Collingham. The Baronet was far too shrewd a man to swallow it as a fact, although chapter and verse were given him by the narrator in a most circumstantial manner. But he did know somewhat of this world and its ways—he thought with so much smoke there was probably some small amount of fire. “Young men would be young men,” he muttered; and perchance his thoughts travelled back a little to that discarded son of his as he made this reflection. He deemed it highly probable that Reginald might be entangled with some connection of the kind, and meditated much whether it would not be friendly to give the banker a hint. “He’s a pompous fool,” he mused, “but I have seen him tolerably shrewd at times, when one has succeeded in getting through the crust of his ineffable vanity.”

And so Sir John one morning informed Mr. Holbourne of what all the town was saying, much to that gentleman's astonishment; stating at the same time that, though he did not personally believe in the rumour, it would be as well perhaps to contradict it, on Reginald's authority.

The banker showed common sense on the occasion—he wrote to his son at once, told him what he had heard, and demanded either license to deny it, or admission of its truth. Reginald's answer came by return of post, and contained a most contemptuous though somewhat curt negation of the report. Mr. Holbourne therefore openly alluded to the rumour, clinching such allusion with the most unqualified contradiction of its truth.

As might be supposed, both Grace and her cousin now became cognizant of the story, and of Reginald's denial of it. Grace turned up her pretty lip, and was very indignant with the scandal-mongering town in which she lived. Marion said little; she laughed at the whole affair to Grace and Mr. Holbourne, but inwardly Miss Langworthy had her own opinion, and was by no means convinced of her lover's innocence. She kept her thoughts locked in her own bosom, and in her next letter to Reginald alluded jestingly and briefly to the subject; but she had made up her mind to know rather more about it, as soon as opportunity offered.

A gossiping country town, however, is not quite so easily choked off its quarry. Aldringham has not quite done with Reginald Holbourne as yet. Sinister whispers go about now that it is even worse than first reported. Mr. Reginald may deny his marriage; it would be more respectable if he had made his associate an honest woman, disgraceful as such marriage might be; but there can be no doubt that a lady connected with the theatrical profession resides with him, and is continually to be seen about with him. Some inkling of this second rumour, in vague, unconnected shape, reaches Marion's ears, now rather on the *qui vive* for such gossip. That worldly-minded young lady deems this perhaps a more correct version of the affair; still she says nothing, and nurses her wrath in silence, but is more resolute than ever to get to the bottom of this business.

Just at present, too, Miss Langworthy is engaged in a scheme that she considers of more importance than that of convicting her lover in his transgressions. It may be, should her present project prove successful, that Reginald's offendings shall require no further consideration on her part. Besides, they are going to town in about three weeks, and it will be time enough then to investigate these stories. Since the bazaar Robert Collingham has been a most pertinacious visitor at the banker's; he drops in continually to lunch, to afternoon tea, and at various odd times. As before stated, he is not a man of much conversation on general topics. It is not now the shooting season, and consequently he is debarred in great

measure from riding one of his hobbies. Ladies as a rule are not much given to talk farming, so that his other hobby-horse fails to do him much service in Mr. Holbourne's drawing-room. Both girls laugh at him, and deem him rather a bore; yet both are wondrous civil to him—Grace for reasons which we can easily divine, Marion from ulterior motives of her own. Miss Langworthy has made up her mind that Robert Collingham would make a very eligible husband.

Mr. Collingham, conscious of his deficiencies in the conversational way, has hit upon a happy though novel expedient—he takes in *Punch*. On Wednesday, after inquiring whether the ladies have seen *Punch*, which now, understanding his ways, they always good-naturedly deny, he proceeds to entertain them with the leading facetiæ of that journal; on Thursday he runs through the odd corners for their delectation; on Friday he brings them *Punch*; and on Saturday he looks in to laugh over the jokes in concert with them; if he calls on the Monday or Tuesday, he speculates a good deal as to whether *Punch* will be good that week. Grace and Marion invariably now dub him "Punch" in their conversation with each other.

An impartial observer would have confessed himself puzzled as to which of the ladies it was that constituted Robert Collingham's attraction. His attentions were very evenly bestowed. If he talked more to Marion, of a surety his eyes wandered more often to Grace. Miss Holbourne could converse pleasantly enough with those who contributed their own fair quota to such intercourse, but she did not possess her cousin's talent of providing conversation for two. Marion possessed this rare gift to a considerable degree. It was not that she did so very much more than her own share of the talking, but the way she threw the ball back to her companion was marvellously clever. The *hardiesse* with which she would interpolate her conversation with "As you were saying the other day," or "I know you hold a different opinion; you look upon it from such a view," was scarce credible. That these opposing views or sayings were of her own improvising, I need scarcely observe; but so

cleverly was it done, that the distressed conversationalist suddenly found himself furnished with argument or rejoinder. And Marion never sought to interfere, as long as her companion's talk showed a symptom of vitality; but when it flickered in the socket, then she stepped in once more to the rescue. It was not much to be wondered at, under these circumstances, that it was to Miss Langworthy that Robert Collingham principally addressed himself.

He was right! It would be well for society if there were a few more Miss Langworthys diffused through our social system—only think,

“Ye diners out from whom we guard our spoons,”

what a real blessing to be bidden to take such a lady in to dinner! I'll admit myself having a very imperfect sense of rectitude, and having many times wished that my yoke partner on such occasion had been more amusing, and rather less orthodox. I don't hold that your anecdote need stand cross-examination. Give me imagination, and a *fico* for veracity at the dinner-table. Some notable liars that I have met in my day, have proved most excellent company over a bottle of claret.

Mr. Collingham continued, however, to call and talk *Punch* with wonderful pertinacity; and Miss Langworthy showed much ability and patience in making the best of him under such circumstances.

“Ah,” she said, laughingly, one afternoon, “you think, because we are a little diffident about showing our knowledge, that we women understand nothing about agriculture. Perhaps we don't; but when you tell me, as you did the other day, that these small holdings are the curse of the unhappy tenants thereof, I must venture to disagree with you.”

Now this was pure improvisation upon Miss Langworthy's part. Robert Collingham, to do him justice, had studiously excluded his views on the land question from his conversation; but there was really no more to be said about *Punch* on that occasion, and Marion felt it incumbent upon her to give him a fresh opening. She knew perfectly well on what subjects his tongue was oiled

The bait took. Robert Collingham flew at it like a pike at a frog in March, and waxed eloquent upon the misery twenty-acre farms entailed upon the proprietors. The young lady picked his brains as he spoke, and interlocuted pungent remarks on his observations, derived entirely from such knowledge as she acquired as he went on. Grace listened much amused at her cousin's shifty manœuvring, especially at the audacious way in which Marion occasionally quoted him against himself. Even Robert Collingham, at last, denied some of the statements Miss Langworthy put in his mouth, upon which that young lady threw up her hands in the prettiest manner, and proclaimed herself the veriest fool to have tried to argue on such a topic with a man who understood it in all its branches.

"Beaten, Mr. Collingham—beaten, I admit. You are too clever for me. You have thoroughly studied the subject, and I, woman-like, have dabbled in it, and formed wild judgment thereon; as Sir Andrews says, 'An I had known you were so cunning of fence, I had never have fought you.' But I stick to my prerogative—'Convinced against my will, I'm of the same opinion still.'"

As Robert Collingham walked home that evening, he was rather perplexed himself about which of the girls it really was that he so constantly called at the banker's house to see. He knew perfectly well that his original attraction had been Grace, but there was no denying that her cousin was fair likewise, and gifted with a silvery tongue and rare intelligence. He was also indistinctly conscious of not progressing quite so satisfactorily with Miss Holbourne as he did with Miss Langworthy. Still, marrying the wealthy banker's only daughter was one thing, and marrying his next door to penniless niece another. If he could but have transposed them, how simple it would then be! In the meantime, Mr. Collingham felt that he had a somewhat abstruse problem to solve. A man of slow, lethargic temperament, and not likely to compromise himself lightly—a man who would contemplate matrimony in a somewhat commercial spirit, and look for an accession of money or connection in any alliance he might form, yet of sufficient calibre to compre-

hend that, situated as he was, it was possible that a clever woman like his wife might more than compensate for such deficiencies by her tact and talent. If he was not qualified to shine much socially, yet Robert Collingham had strong common-sense. He had seen several of his compeers who had owed a considerable amount of their rise up life's ladder to the assistance of their helpmates. albeit they had brought their lords no better dowry than a woman's shrewd wit and a woman's strong heart.

Still Robert Collingham was not at all the man to depart from his original intention lightly. He had commenced his visits at the banker's with the distinctly laid-down object of wooing Grace for his wife. He had been much struck with her at the ball, he had thought it over in a most business-like manner; he argued very naturally that he would be a son-in-law whom Mr. Holbourne must thoroughly approve—that, at all events, in course of time, Grace must inherit a considerable sum of money. She was very handsome, a favourite of his father's—his god-daughter, in fact. In short, he deemed her a most eligible damsel at whom to throw his handkerchief, and this son of a provincial Caliph fell momentarily into the error of thinking he had but to woo to win. He had some justification for such mistake; he knew that there were plenty of maidens, well dowered as Miss Holbourne, who would gladly have accepted the heir of a tolerably well-to-do baronetcy, should he but ask them. To do him justice, he soon saw that Grace was not one of that stamp—that she was not to be won so lightly; but, in very sooth, at this present moment Robert Collingham would have been much puzzled to decide as to which of these girls it was he would fain marry. Marion's tactics of that afternoon had increased his admiration and regard for her considerably.

Grace had been over to Churton two or three times since the day of the walk to "The Hazels," and upon one occasion by herself. Sylla could talk of nothing else but her meeting with Charlie. She mourned so that she had not extracted from him what had been the cause of his rupture with Sir John.

"It was stupid, foolish of me, Gracie. If I did but

know the truth of that story, I might put things right again, I think. But I was so wild with delight at meeting him, I quite forgot to ask about it."

"It would have been no use if you had, Sylla," replied Miss Holbourne. "That subject is a forbidden one. Charlie won't allow me to allude to it even, though he will tell me anything else about himself."

"Ah! but it would have been different with me," murmured Miss Collingham, softly.

Grace's colour heightened as she replied,

"Sylla, if I thought Charlie could share a trouble with you, such as I know this is to him, and could refuse to let me also bear my share of his sorrow, although I stand his plighted wife now, I would never go to the altar with him. But I don't think so; I trust him thoroughly, and know I shall be told all in due season."

A sharp pang shot through Miss Collingham's heart. She was loth to recognize that she was no longer to stand first in the affection of that brother whom she so worshipped. She saw her speech had wounded Grace's jealous love. Small wonder. What girl passionately in love could have borne the intimation that her lover might confide to his sister what he declined to entrust to her?

A few seconds, and then Sylla stole her arm around her companion's waist, and almost whispered into her ear,

"Forgive me, Gracie. I have been first to him so long that I forgot. Let us be true sisters, and pardon my foolish speech. You are right, dearest, but you must still leave me a place in his heart all the same. You won't come between him and his blind sister, will you?"

She faltered forth the last words almost plaintively, and ere they were well spoken, she was enfolded in Gracie's arms, as she exclaimed,

"Sylla, don't say such things. I could bite my tongue out now for what I have said. True sisters, ay, true sisters ever! I was a wretch, even for a moment to have felt jealous of his love for you!"

It may be deemed that Charlie Collingham might

have managed to see his sister during these four years somewhat sooner, but two or three things must be borne in mind. Firstly, that he was rigorously forbidden his father's house ; secondly, Sylla's affliction ; and, thirdly, that his acquaintance with Grace had only been renewed some few months back, and had but of late waxed into what it had now become, and so given him title to lay claim to her assistance in the matter.





CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE PEOPLE'S COSMORAMA.

SCENE, that small workshop at Brompton, in which those two shining lights of literature, Collingham and Donaldson, manufacture much manuscript for the delectation of the public.

Standing on the hearthrug, Mr. Donaldson, a silver goblet in his right hand, moulded in the likeness of a skull, and inscribed round the rim with the appropriate inscription of "Here's a health to them that's awa'," is holding conference with Miss Meggott.

"So you don't like it, Polly, eh? That's what comes of letting her take her own character for a week, Charlie. I told you it would never do. When you let 'em select their own parts they always get bumptious."

"I know what I like, and I know what I don't like," replied Miss Meggott, tersely, "and that's more than a good many people do. And I say what I think, with no humbug about it, and that's more than most people do. Fiddlesticks," replied that young lady, snapping her fingers. "You know you are not so good as usual this time, as well as I do. The reviews may butter you up, but if you want Polly Meggott's opinion, you've got it!"

"Yes," retorted Jim laughing, "there was not much doubt about my getting that, whether I wanted it or not."

"It's all very fine, young people," replied Polly, demurely. "It's my duty to look after you and see what you're doing. Bless me, I'm bound to see you're grinding enough corn to pay the rent! You're a precious idle couple, and it's quite as well you've somebody to keep you up to the mark."

"Don't be scurrilous, Polly; here's your health," and Donaldson drained the goblet and placed it on the table. "Now what's the matter with the comedy?"

"Well, I'll tell you. It drags in the last act. All the interest is out of it after the second. Bless you! I didn't want to wait to see what came of them all, because I knew. Now I hate to know how it's all going to finish till within ten minutes of the curtain. Them's first principles of the drama, and you'd better stick to 'em in future. Now don't be down in your luck," continued Miss Meggott; "I'll go to-morrow with mother's umbrella and see what I can do for it. What's it to be—dinner at home, and give trouble; or dine out, and spend money?"

"We'll dine at home, and get half-a-dozen evil spirits to come and keep us company. Sing choruses till sunrise, and otherwise make the welkin ring again!" retorted Donaldson, laughing.

"All right, I'm used to being put upon, and the police station is handy when you get past bearing," replied Miss Meggott. "What's it to be? Are they to be fed upon bread and cheese, or are we to run into the extravagance of chops? You men are always thinking of supporting the system, as you call it, instead of enlarging your minds."

"With your talent for the amenities of conversation, Polly, we can't be sufficiently thankful that you were not born dumb."

"Yes, it would have been sad that. What a lot of wholesome truths you would have escaped hearing, Mr. Donaldson!"

"Never mind, Polly, as you're losing your temper we'll go out to dinner. I know you'd turn out a perfect fiend if we did not."

"It would be a wonder if I didn't lose something,

considering the company I have got into," retorted Miss Meggott laughing. "And as to how I might turn out, you needn't taunt me with my weakness, Mr. Donaldson; I know I pick up the ways of those I associate with, worse luck!"

Miss Meggott was an adept at chaff, and it was by no means easy to obtain the best of her in such light *persiflage*.

"I give in, Polly," said Donaldson. "Your tongue is all too glib for me this morning."

"Sorry I can't return the compliment," retorted Miss Meggott. "But I suppose that means we are to stop joking. I notice you always do when I have the best of it."

"And is not that always the case, when I am rash enough to match myself against that quick wit of yours?"

"Come, no more chaff. You get the best of me quite as often as is good for you. No dinner at home to-night?" said Miss Meggott interrogatively.

"No, Polly, we are full of high intent and virtuous resolution. We are going to study from life a bit."

"Ah, I know! Don't forget your latch-key. Recollect you may break the street door in, but I'm not to be knocked up. If you haven't a key there's nothing for you but burglary, or to sit on the steps till the milk comes!" With which advice Miss Meggott departed.

"Well, Charlie, was the Aldringham trip satisfactory? I am quite ready to do postman again for you in that quarter, whenever you please, although I can't say, as far as I was concerned, that the lady was

'Prodigal of all dear grace,
As nature was in making graces dear,
When she did starve the general world beside,
And prodigally gave them all to *her*.'

Your sweetheart's very handsome, Charlie, but she didn't seem to care about paying sixpence for your letter."

"Yes, she told me of your avarice, and how you wrung that amount from her, and bade me say that you owed it to charity of some sort."

"Now, Heaven forefend that I should ever play Mercury

again!" retorted Donaldson. "Could sweeter charity ever be exercised than the ministering to two love-stricken mortals? And yet I'm accused of lack of that virtue! By-the-way, I made a mistake in the first instance, and tried hard to dispose of your missive to another lady—a nice-looking girl, too."

"Yes, that was her cousin. I don't know why, for I have barely ever spoken to her, but I mistrust her proving a friend to me. I've adverse sympathies, if you understand what that means," replied Collingham, laughing.

"Charlie, my boy, don't begin improvising domestic melodrama. You're encroaching on my prerogative. When your love affair goes awry, it will be my business to dramatise it, and paint the opposers of your happiness in inkiest hues. In the meantime, come along."

"Where are we bound for?" inquired Charlie; "what shall we do? Dinner first, I presume?"

"Yes. You're good for a stretch, are you not? Let's walk into town, and get something to eat at the 'Friars.' I want to see Jemmy O'Brian there, if I can catch him. He was telling me the other day that he had found a place down Islington way, that was worth our looking in at. It'll make an agony column for *The Misanthrope*, if we don't get more out of it. At present I only recollect it's a little past the Harmonic."

"Good," replied Charlie, laughing. "A very pretty programme; mutton chops and unlimited rowdyism to wind up with."

"All in the way of business," replied Donaldson. "I never tire of wandering about the big City by gas-light. To me it's a study of perpetually accumulating interest. Amongst the thousands of people who come to London, how very few know London! I don't mean merely their way about it, but the street life and queer haunts of the metropolis."

"No," said Charlie, sententiously. "People would think we mocked them if we told them that one of the finest sights in town was to stand at the top of North Audley Street, and gaze down Oxford Street at four A.M. on a Summer morning, and yet it is but a fortnight ago we agreed it was so."

"Yes, here we are at the Green. I don't suppose many West-enders ever set foot on its most figurative turf. The paving-stone has superseded the grass full many a year, but I can fancy Clerkenwell Green looked upon as genuine sward by many a Londoner. We haven't passed Jerusalem Court, have we."

"No, next turning to the right."

Two or three more seconds, and they turned sharp down a narrow alley, from whence they emerged upon a somewhat irregular quadrangle. Facing them stood the grand old gateway of the Priory of the Knights of St. John—sole vestige remaining of the magnificent establishment that they once held here. This gateway is now a tavern, and it was in this hostelrie that the somewhat Zingari association known as The Friars was at present located. It was not a club, in the present sense of the term. House of its own had it none. Bare-backed friars, bare-footed friars, the reverend community were fond of designating themselves; bare-faced friars, bare-witted friars, they were dubbed by a similar glib-tongued rival institution. Their system was to engage some three or four rooms at an old-fashioned tavern, and there they remained till disagreement with their landlord, desire of change, or some other whim, sent them once more in search of quarters. Hotels were contrary to the rule of the order, which ordained that they should "seek shelter and sustenance only in good old-fashioned hostelries, and not in those new-fangled houses of entertainment which men do call hotels."

For the present, and for some two years past, the "Gate Tavern" had been their abiding place. Passing through the bar, with a good-humoured nod of recognition to the young lady therein presiding, the two young men made their way up a narrow and somewhat complicated staircase, and entered a barely-furnished room—a commonplace chamber enough, remarkable for only two things—on one side of the room ran a glazed book-case, tolerably well-filled, which, on investigation, was found to contain nothing but the numbers of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, dating from its commencement; while on a raised dais at the upper end of the apartment stood a

straight, high-backed, most uncomfortable-looking wooden arm-chair—a seat of much reverence all the same, known and inscribed as Dr. Johnson's chair. From the depths of that upright piece of furniture, tradition said the great lexicographer had penned most of "The Rambler;" and as you gazed at that ponderous bit of upholstery of by-gone days, it would seem partially to account for those sonorous periods. One could scarcely imagine light, frothy articles written by the tenant of that stiff old chair. Famous the room in literary history as the editorial office of Cave, the publisher of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and scene of that dinner with Harte, in which the author of the "Life of Savage," from his poverty of raiment, had his dinner sent to him behind the screen. Sad episode to look back upon in the life of so great a man; and yet the lives of many of our greatest lights are but too prolific of such trials. Massinger died a pauper; "rare Ben Jonson" was hard put to it to scrape bread and cheese together at times; while Carey, the author of our National Anthem, committed suicide with three halfpence in his pocket.

But a truce to such gloomy reflections—times are better with the literary profession in these days.

Three or four friars lounge about the fireplace, attired in the costume of the day, with no savour of conventual garments about them. They are engaged principally in the consumption of tobacco. They hail the advent of Collingham and Jim Donaldson with much geniality, and in answer to the latter's inquiry about Jimmy O'Brian, inform him that the sub-prior is in the next room, manufacturing a grill, of extraordinary biting character, for his own delectation. Charlie and Donaldson blunder down half a dozen steps, stumble up half a dozen more, and enter the refectory—a fine old room, panelled with oak, dark as night from age; the bust of Shakespeare at one end, faced by the bust of Johnson at the other. Historic spot this also, for it was herein that Garrick, as a stripling, first played in London before Cave and his 'prentice boys, they little thinking that he who fretted his hour for their amusement was destined to prove the Roscius of his nation.

"All hail, my brethren, all hail!" exclaimed a stout,

florid, bead-eyed little man, who, with some fragments of chicken before him, and surrounded with cruets and sauces, seemed engaged in some unholy incantation. "Charlie, my chick, how goes on the mourning-coach in which you so persistently bewail the times we live in? You're firing away your ammunition a trifle too fast, my boy. You'll have us all under the red flag by Christmas at latest; and as you know we shall all be nothing of the sort, what do you mean to do next? You can't give out the revolution has commenced, you know, and call the nation to arms without something to go upon."

"Never you mind," retorted Collingham. "*The Misanthrope* is never likely to lack matter to wail over. We shall see a foreign war, or something of that sort, 'looming in the future' by that time. At all events, sanitary reform is always a good standing dish to fall back upon."

"Reckon you're smart, sir; guess you've collared the idea. You'll do to journalize in New York in another year or two, you will," exclaimed a shrewd, sallow-faced man, with a humorous twinkle in his eye. "That's just it; You must either harrow the public's feelings, or soap 'em—either find a frightful flaw in the social fabric, or tell 'em it's about as near perfection just now as ever they'll get it."

"Shut, up, Slymme!" exclaimed the grill-compounder. "What do you know about journalising?"

"Think I'm talking tall—eh, O'Brian?" responded the American. "Bless you, I've run 'a daily' in my time. There's not a darned trade I didn't have a shy at before I settled down into the show business. How air you, Mr. Donaldson? You look peart and chipper. G'wine to feed? I've just been *packing* a chop myself. Tell me your last piece has fetched the public some."

"Not done amiss," replied the dramatist. "I say, Jemmy, where's this new entertainment you were telling me about the other night? Collingham and I mean investigating it as soon as we've had something to eat."

"It's no distance from here," replied O'Brian, desisting from his labours, with the pepper-castor poised in his hand. "Sorry I can't come with you myself this evening,

but I'm engaged. It's just past the Harmonic; bear to your left when you come to the fork of the High Street, and you'll soon see the People's Cosmorama in full blast."

"Guess I'll jine in," remarked Mr. Slymme, "if you've no objection. Shows air my business—of all kinds—from two-headed nightingales to patent theatres. If I fancy the speculation, maybe I'll buy it.

"Well," said O'Brien, "you are all three qualified to run alone and know town; but I shouldn't take a watch or much money to speak of. Keep the rules of the order in mind, my sons, and if the ungodly should turn out your pockets to-night, see they find little in them besides the traditional cockleshell."

"Ora pro nobis, O frater," laughed Collingham. "The brethren of the order would hardly pay for looting, even in their Sunday clothes. No professional would waste time in turning out a journalist's pockets. Besides, I take it, like most of my guild, my face is pretty well known about town by this."

"Yes, Charlie, that may be; but you're going to witness to-night a revolutionary diorama, commented on by a political incendiary—with an audience one half of whom are roughs, the others probably decent artizans out of work, either from a strike or bad luck. The rowdy element are very likely to go in for hustling and robbery."

"Reckon, O'Brien, if it comes to a free fight, we can straighten out and look ugly as well as our neighbours. I don't rile easy, but I rile cussed strong when I du!"

"Now, then, Charlie," exclaimed Donaldson, "the sooner we're off the better. If you've finished your food, let's make a start."

"All right," said Collingham, as he hastily gulped down the residue of his sherry.

"Good night, and luck attend you," laughed O'Brien. "If I don't hear of some of you in three days—the mysterious Pollaky and self will be in communication. Consider me

'The sweet little cherub that sits up aloft,
To keep watch o'er the life of poor Jack.'

for which consult Dibden, 'and when found, make a note on.' "

The trio made their way up St. John Street, and pushed on till they found themselves abreast of the Harmonic.

"Reckon we'll look in here for five minutes," observed Mr. Slymme. "Knott, who owns the concern, is a friend of mine. Smart man Knott, with gumption and go about him. Found this place pretty near a dead horse business, and there ain't a prettier saloon in all London than he's made of it."

Passing through the bar, they entered a spacious, gaudily-decorated music-hall, got up with stalls, private boxes, and gallery—sumptuous fittings, which, judging from the closely-packed audience had proved a by no means unremunerative outlay. On the stage a somewhat curtailed representation of one of Offenbach's pieces was in course of representation, and the enthusiastic plaudits that greeted the performance showed clearly that the English lower-classes have much appreciation of good music, when placed within their reach.

They had not been long seated before they were described by the lessee, who speedily came forward to greet Mr. Slymme. Mr. Knott wore the lowest of turn-down collars, the narrowest of neck-handkerchiefs, and the biggest of diamond rings. These extreme points in his costume once got over, there was nothing very striking about Mr. Knott, beyond his vivacity of manner. He was one of those men whom it is impossible to reduce to despondency. If the Harmonic had blown up commercially the next day, Mr. Knott would have started in some other speculation long before the debris of his last venture had been cleared away. It was perhaps this somewhat American point in his character that had so won Mr. Slymme's admiration.

When the lessee of the Harmonic heard of their projected visit to the People's Cosmorama he laughed.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "you don't know when to let well alone. If you stay here you will be fairly amused, and I can promise you a tidy supper and a good cigar when the curtain's down. You're going amongst

a set of roughs, to see something that in all probability won't amuse you a bit. Best keep your places here, believe me."

"Guess you're three parts right, old man," replied Slymme; "but, you see, we've a thirst for novelty, we have. Your show ain't bad, and that's a fact; but then there's heaps of shows like yours on hand in this meetropolis."

"Very good of you, Mr. Knott, to ask us," chimed in Collingham; "but our friend Slymme here has just hit it. We don't much expect to be amused, but we fancy we shall see an entertainment very different from any we have ever witnessed—that's the attraction."

"That's so," chimed in the American. "We go in for doing all creation, and the People's Cosmorama air next on the list. Night, old oss."

"Wish you well through it," laughed Mr. Knott. "Allow me to prophesy that, next time you are this way, you'll patronize the Harmonic, and not the Cosmorama."

"Very likely," laughed Donaldson, "and shall most likely wish we had stuck to it to-night." And nodding gaily to the lessee, he followed his friends.

Now the advent of the trio had awakened the attention of an indolent loungeur at the other end of the stalls. He eyed them keenly during the conversation with Knott, and upon seeing them take their departure, caught up his hat and followed their example. He lounged listlessly through the bar and lobby after them, never approaching very near them, never apparently taking any notice of them; but, for all that, never for one instant losing sight of them. In the street it was the same; he sauntered leisurely along some fifteen yards or so behind them.

At last Donaldson exclaimed, "Here we are!" as, up turning a few yards to the left of the Liverpool Road, he caught sight of a gaudy fanlight, bearing the inscription of "The People's Cosmorama." The entrance is not imposing—the box-office still less so.

"What's to pay?—any difference in the seats?" inquired Donaldson, from the precocious youth installed therein.

"It's tuppence all over, and you sits where you can," was the laconic rejoinder.

"Simple—very," said Jim, as he paid for their tickets, and passed on into a large, dimly-lighted room.

The walls were bare and whitewashed, destitute of any attempt at decoration, unless the few sconces with their guttering candles might be deemed such. These too appeared only at the lower end of the room, at which you entered. The upper part was enshrouded in darkness, with the exception of the dim, weird light which lit up the panoramic views upon the stage. These following in historical sequence, and commencing with the destruction of the Bastille, were all illustrative of the upheavals of the mob; while from out of the darkness to the left of the stage came the wild, nervous voice of the lecturer, explanatory of the rude pictures set before the audience. In fierce, harsh, denunciatory language did he point out the endless struggles of the workingmen to obtain their rights; dwelt in tones of exultation upon how often they had nearly succeeded, then died away into a very diapason of mournfulness as he recorded their successive failures. He quoted the Gordon Riots, the illustrating picture evidently composed from Barnaby Rudge, as the last stand of the freemen of England. The Paris *coup-d'état* of '48, representing, as he said, the hard-working artisans shot down by the ruthless soldiery of a tyrannical despot, formed another view. The final scene pictured the advance of the Versaillists over the barricades of the Commune, "the strangling of the newborn Republic in its cradle," continued the orator, "and the setting up of the veriest mockery that was ever designated a government. Working men," he went on, "you have hands, you have heads, but ye lack hearts. The days of serfdom are past, and ye continue slaves. Co-operation is what we require, throughout the length and breadth of Europe. Your assembly squabbles over re-distribution of seats; we want re-distribution of property. They throw to you the sop of the ballot—tell them that you will have no large landed proprietors; that their deer forests cry out against them; that they shall no longer batten on their acres, while the

proletarians starve; that the people have been down-trodden long enough, and that your right in the soil of your birth must be established by bloodshed if no milder argument holds sway. What says Proudhon, the philosopher of our class? 'Property is theft.' And I tell you it is your own hands must right your wrongs. I have spoken. Send round the plate, Tom," said the orator, *sotto voce*, as he resumed his seat, and the curtain fell upon the storming of the barricades of the Commune. "I've pitched it in very strong, and they ought to come down for the International pretty handsome to-night."

"Neat," said Charlie. "Of course a new division of the family silver must be highly beneficial to those who've got no plate."

"I'm a republican, I am," said Mr. Slymme—"I reckon it rather tops any form of government invented yet. When it's beat, it'll be by something brought out our side the water, and we shall patent it, of course. But if that cuss broached his ideas about going halves in other people's dollars in New York, he'd be either laughed out of the city, or lynched. It would depend, you see, a good deal upon how our folks took it."

Several more tin sconces were now illuminated, and the lights upon the stage also turned up; and then a young lady, far more profuse in paint than petticoat, explained in shrill tones, to the accompaniment of a jangling piano, that her "love was a saileur boy, only nineteen years old!"

Collingham, meanwhile, was studying the room and its inhabitants, which the hitherto imperfect light had afforded no opportunity of doing. He saw that in front there were several rows of benches closely filled by grimy, serious-looking men, evidently of the working-class. Many of them dropped half-pence into the plate that was now handed round, for the benefit of the distressed brethren in Paris, according to the placard on the breast of the holder, a good-looking, neatly-dressed girl, decorated with tricoloured ribbons. At the back, where he and his companions were standing for lack of seats, he noticed that the men were of a different class—much younger, and with a speciality for gaudy neckerchief, and

that peculiar description of long curl on either side of the head so appropriately designated a Newgate knocker. Further, he remarked that whereas on the front benches there was a great paucity of women, in the back and unseated space there were divers gaudily-dressed females, young in years, but all wearing that hard, unmistakable countenance, that bespoke them but too clearly as of the

“Forty thousand women with one smile,
Who only smile at night beneath the gas,”

Taking all this in with the keen eye that to those accustomed to describe on paper what they see becomes almost instinct, Charlie soon became conscious that he and his friends were also under surveillance; that they in their turn had attracted the notice of a small knot of by no means honest-looking citizens, who apparently were involved in deep counsel concerning them. He quietly called his companions' attention to the circumstance.

“A rough-looking lot,” observed Donaldson. “Well, we've seen all there is to see here, and may as well be going—eh, Slymme?”

“Right you air,” replied that worthy. “Don't suppose you've either of you got a shooting-iron?”

Donaldson and Charlie shook their heads.

“Guessed as much,” continued Mr. Slymme. “You'd better let me bring up the rear, then. Daresay your London police are right smart, and all the rest of it: but I've seen the police in my time interfere just two or three minutes after it ceased to be of much consequence to one of the parties—just when ‘the subsequent proceedings interested him no more,’ so I always carry a Derringer on principle. I was raised down West, where you might get along without a watch, but not without a six-shooter. Now, Mr. Donaldson, slope!”

As the two made their way leisurely to the door, it was quite evident that some half score of raffish-looking young men were following them, and gradually closing upon them.

“Keep clear,” muttered Mr. Slymme—“they'll likely rush us the minute we're outside. If they'd only give me an excuse to show the iron, it would prevent a row, perhaps.”

But though quietly surrounding them, not one of these people had as yet given any overt cause of offence.

It may be remembered that an individual had seemed struck with the appearance of Donaldson and Collingham at the Harmonic, that he had subsequently followed them in the street. He had indeed tracked them to the door of the People's Cosmorama, and, after some apparently slight debate with himself, paid his money, and entered that place of entertainment. He had contented himself with a post near the door, and though apparently but little interested in the lecture, was keenly observant of the behaviour of the audience. As the trio neared the doorway, he slipped through the throng, and contrived for a second or two to get close to them.

"Hist! Mr. Donaldson," he whispered; "you're spotted. You will all three be tripped up as soon as they get you outside. Keep clear of the women, if you can, and run, if needs be, for the High Street."

Ere Jim had time even to recognise the speaker, he had vanished. But he proved a true prophet, for before they had gone fifty yards a woman attempted to clutch his arm, from whom, thanks to this timely warning, he swung himself roughly clear, and faced about just in time to knock down a man who attempted to close with him from behind. Collingham, meanwhile, was struggling with two or three men, while the American, having hurled a woman who had grappled with him into the middle of the street, flashed his revolver in the face of his foes, placed his back to the wall, and thundered out—

"Stand back, you skunks, or by the 'tarnal, some of you'll go under before your time!"

The sight of the pistol, and the vigorous resistance of both Donaldson and Collingham, caused the enemy to fall back—the latter had struggled clear of his assailants, and now stood with his back to the wall by the side of Symme. How it would have fared with them it is bootless to conjecture, for, at that instant, from the other side of the street, rang, clear and shrill, the blast of a police whistle, and a voice from the darkness exclaimed,

"Double up, men, look sharp! here's a gang of pick-pockets on the lay."

In a second, both men and women were scuttling in the opposite direction from that of the advancing police.

"Come along, gentlemen," said Mr. Lightfoot, as he crossed over to them—"we've no time to lose. I've only a whistle, and deuce a policeman to back me up. They're well scared for the present, but we'd better not wait for them to discover it's a bam."

"Upon my word," exclaimed Collingham, when they had regained the High Street, "we're confoundedly obliged to you, whoever you are. You have rescued us from rather an awkward scrape."

"Dear me, Charlie, don't you recognise your Scarborough entertainer, now we have got back to better-lighted streets?" said Donaldson, laughing.

"No! Not Mr. Lightfoot, is it? How on earth did you happen to turn up so opportunely for us?"

"Well, gentlemen, I saw you in the Harmonic; out of sheer whim and curiosity I followed you, to see what had brought you to these parts. When I saw you turn into the Cosmorama, it struck me that pretty much what did happen would happen. My personal assistance wouldn't have been worth a farthing; they were too many for that, and my head's worth more than my hands any day. My only chance of serving you was to create a panic as soon as you were attacked, I don't think I succeeded badly."

"Stranger," said Mr. Slymme, who had listened attentively to the foregoing, "you're a great strategist. There have been great commanders who haven't sucked in a half of your requirements. You're spry down to the soles of your boots, you air—and might run alone amongst the Green Mountain boys. If a V spot—that is to say, a sovereign—is the slightest use to you——"

"Say no more, sir, say no more," interrupted Mr. Lightfoot, airily; "the ever fluctuating tide of fortune is just now with me upon the ebb. I think there is a description of payment generally recognised among ship-owners as salvage. Under the circumstances, gentlemen, I think I may accept that from you, without derogation of caste."

The American grinned as he placed the coin in

Lightfoot's hand ; it was a bit of humbug after his own heart, that conceit of salvage. His companions followed suit, and then, raising his hat, Mr. Lightfoot wished them good night.

"Never check curiosity," muttered Mr. Lightfoot, as he walked leisurely home ; "it's a laudable and lucrative passion. I've made three sovereigns to-night by the mere whim of ascertaining where those men were going to. There's nothing like acquiring information ; you can never tell but that it may turn out saleable some day."





CHAPTER XIV

A BITE AT THE TRIMMERS.



ENONIDAS LIGHTFOOT, philosopher and philanthropist, resided at this time in Islington. Change of scene, he was wont to declare, was essential to his health. Ill-tempered people might have suggested that there were other reasons for his wandering existence—that, after the manner of the Bedouin, it behoved him to strike his tent, and away after a successful raid. However that might be, Mr. Lightfoot was no petty swindler; constantly as he changed his lodgings, he always duly satisfied all tradespeople's claims in the neighbourhood, and paid his rent.

"Miserable mistake," he would say, "the not doing so, committed only by wretched neophytes who pretend to understand the grand mystery of living by their wits—occult science, which, while it never fails the past master, crushes 'prentices and bunglers by thousands in its complicated machinery. It requires as deep study as law or medicine, and is a vocation for which not one man in a thousand is adapted."

It is the morning after Mr. Lightfoot had earned his salvage at the Cosmorama; breakfast is spread in a neatly-furnished sitting-room, into which the sun shines cheerily; a smartly-dressed and by no means bad-looking woman flits about the apartment, makes the tea, and then quietly turns her attention to a pile of newspapers.

She cuts these, and deliberately places the advertisement sheets upon the writing-table. While she is thus engaged, a man's voice humming a popular air, proceeds from the adjoining room. For a second he pauses and exclaims,

"Only three sovereigns! Damme! like Clive, when I think upon it, I'm lost in astonishment at my own moderation. Ah!" with a deep sigh; and then he burst forth into a fragment.

" 'In a second back parlour in Chancery Lane
Lived a knowing old man, who did always maintain,
What you get you should stick to, and ever retain;
Which is understood only in Chancery Lane.
In Chancery Lane, in Chancery Lane, ' &c."

"Leo," exclaims the lady, "breakfast is ready, the papers sorted, and there are a pile of letters for you."

"Thanks, my dear," replied her husband. "I am rather late this morning. I threw away my time and health last night from sheer good-nature. I saved three lives, three purses, and made three sovereigns by the transaction. There is a rule of three sum for you; three threes are nine, and that's the number of the muses. I'll be with you directly.

" 'When your 'limited companies' burst up and smash,
When your insurance ditto come down with a crash,
When creditors fail their assets to obtain,
There's by no means bad pickings in Chancery Lane—
In Chancery Lane, in Chancery Lane,
There's by no means bad pickings in Chancery Lane!'"

A few minutes more, and, robed in a shawl-pattern dressing-gown, Mr. Lightfoot, still humming the refrain, makes his appearance.

"Well, Etta," he exclaimed, "have you run your eye over the daily record of man's wants, whims, and weaknesses, and ascertained whether there is anything that looks like conducing to our benefit?"

"No, I haven't had time," rejoined the lady; "we'll go into business after breakfast."

"Certainly, my dear. The foolishness of man is too sad a study to contemplate fasting, and, thanks to the infatuation of that elderly spinster who sought a home with a kindred spirit above ordinary conventionalities,

we are not at present in impoverished circumstances. It did you great credit that last hit," said Mr. Lightfoot, as he sipped his tea.

"Yes," returned his lady; "she kept a good house for us for six months, and if she had not fallen so desperately in love with you, it might have gone on still."

"Yes, Etta; it's the one weakness in your otherwise faultless disposition, that *souphçon* of jealousy ——"

"No, sir, it wasn't the case there. I'll not deny but what I can't stand more than a certain amount of your love-making, when it looks dangerous to myself. I wasn't afraid in this case, but the complications were getting beyond us; it was safest to quarrel."

Mr. Lightfoot laughed softly.

"Yes, it was very rich, you two quarrelling over the fascinating Colonel; and she, poor soul, little dreaming that I was your husband all the time. I never met a woman more determined to marry me."

There was a dash of sharpness in Mrs. Lightfoot's tone as she replied—

"Yes, but you know well I'll stand no bigamy—I'll be true to you, Leo, in aught else, but I'd give relentless evidence on that point."

"Don't be excited, Etta; one wife is, heaven knows, enough for any man, and I'm well satisfied with the one I've got."

The lady's face softened.

"I don't think I've been a bad one to you, Leo," she replied gently; "but if you've finished, we had better commence work."

Now business in the firm of Lightfoot & Co. was certainly of an original description, Mr. Lightfoot ran rapidly through his letters, with a keen and practised eye. About three-fourths of them he tore up, and then threw into the grate, the remainder he laid aside for more mature consideration. The breakfast-things cleared away, Etta produced a couple of most orthodox-looking ledgers, placed the pile of advertisement-sheets she had previously collected at his elbow, and awaited further orders.

"The trimmers first, Etta—let's take up the trimmers,

I forget how many there are down just now—look at the book, my dear.”

Mrs. Lightfoot turned over the pages rapidly for a few minutes, and then replied,

“We have nine catching advertisements out, reckoning all sorts, and twenty-two notes of what you call ‘night-lines,’ with the addresses you gave opposite them.”

“Let’s have the regular trimmers first, Etta,” replied her husband.

“Well, here is, ‘Wanted a gentleman with five hundred pounds capital, and of good business habits, to join the advertiser in floating a patent from which the highest results may be expected. To a young man of energy this affords an opening worthy of consideration. Highest references given and required. Address, in first instance, to R. O. Y., Post-office, Islington.’”

“Nobody nibbling at that hook,” rejoined Mr. Lightfoot. “Not a letter amongst the lot that inquires about that patent. We haven’t taken it out luckily; but what’s the idea opposite it?”

“Something to be done in perforated cork,” replied Mrs. Lightfoot, laughing.

“Very likely,” replied her husband; “but as nobody seems inclined to study the scheme, I’ll not bother myself about working it out just now. My present conception goes no further regarding it than the application of the domestic corkscrew, as occasion requires. Go on.”

“Then here’s ‘To Commercial Travellers.—The advertiser is in a position to place two or three gentlemen in the way of joining a light but profitable business to their usual avocations. Address, Zeno, Post-office, King Street, Cheapside.’”

“Ah, that was the gingerbeer scheme with Alliance labels and teetotal ballads pasted outside the bottles. It ought to have come to something that, if I had managed to catch the commercials. An extra trifle per bottle for the outlay of a taking label should prove lucrative, if you can only sell enough of it. I am afraid, Etta, the commercials are not a credulous class. We’ll stop that advertisement at once.”

But it would be wearisome to follow Mr. Lightfoot

through his nine trimmers. Suffice it to say that at the conclusion of the investigation he remarked to his wife,

"Two fish on, apparently, and one of them, I think, from his letter, it would be sheer waste of time to try to land. Although he has nibbled a little at joining a flourishing concern at the West-end, yet he writes in a suspicious, business sort of way that is most offensive. While humanity is, as a rule, so sweetly confiding, who would be foolish enough to court commercial relations with a coarse, sceptical exception? That young man who offers a bonus to anyone starting him in business, I think must be taken care of. We may as well have his bonus as anyone else; it will be a useful lesson to him, do him a deal of good—show him what a wicked world it is, and impress upon his mind that the tenth commandment is very imperfectly observed, and that, sad to say, there are many people who go a step beyond coveting their neighbours' goods."

"Will you look at the night lines next?" inquired his wife.

What Mr. Lightfoot denominated his night lines, were such letters as he addressed to Miss Langworthy. He invariably gave as his address, in case of reply, certain initials; an advertisement headed with which, in one of the leading journals, was certain to meet with his attention. You would scarcely believe on what absurd grounds he launched these missives. He constantly wrote such notes as that he had addressed to Marion, without one whit more foundation to go upon. He found that about one in twenty bore fruit. The man was simply a most inventive and audacious swindler. He had lived well for years, principally on the advertisement sheets of the daily papers. He spent a large sum per annum in fraudulent notices such as above alluded to, and immediately replied to any advertisement that struck his practised eye as likely to lead to beneficial results to himself. He expended as much time, energy, and talent in concocting and perpetrating his robberies as would have acquired him a comfortable income at any legitimate business. He was most thoroughly aware of this himself, but there was an excitement about it, in the

perpetual scheming, in the perpetual hovering just outside the clutches of the law, in the winding through the clumsy fingers of the police, that to this man had a fascination similar to the gaming-table.

He gloried in his own adroitness. His restless brain was ever contriving. The obtaining possession of some one else's goods or money, as the result of such plotting, was of course the primary, but certainly not, in Lightfoot's case, the strongest motive. He revelled in outwitting his fellow men. Given the most favourable opportunity, and a purse laden with gold, and Lightfoot might have hesitated to pick a pocket; but he would have left no stone unturned to bamboozle the proprietor out of such gold all the same. A more delicate shade of morality is seldom encountered.

Mr. Lightfoot busies himself over the newspapers, and neglects to reply to his wife's question. Suddenly he exclaims, with a laugh,

"This reads well: 'A widow lady and her daughter, residing in a well-furnished house at Notting Hill, offer a most comfortable home, replete with every convenience, to a bachelor of domestic habits.' Ha! ha! Etta, before I was married I should have taught that firm a little lesson. Intention evident that such bachelor should be led like a lamb to the altar. What fun it would have been! I should have fooled both ladies to the top of their bent, named the day, &c., and, one quiet afternoon, have vanished, and left no trace behind. A sacrifice, my dear, to conjugal love, that I don't even now take revenge on such an audacious attempt to entrap the unwary male creature."

"It does read ~~very~~ like a plot of that description," replied his wife, laughing; "but I don't think it's worth your while to prosecute now, Leo."

"Perhaps not, unless for the fun of the thing, or on public grounds. It reads a little like poaching on our manors, Etta. However, now let us see if there's ever a fish on the night-lines.

"*'In a second back-parlour in Chancery Lane,'*"

hummed the volatile Lightfoot, as he still scanned the

papers, while his wife ran through the list of initials he had given to people by which they might communicate with him, should they need his services.

Mr. Lightfoot had not altogether overstated his detective powers to Donaldson. He knew every inch of London, was thoroughly conversant with all the ins and outs of crime, and had rather a taste for doing a little bit of amateur detective work now and then. He would occasionally follow up a case of celebrity, entirely for his own satisfaction—working it out sometimes altogether, sometimes only to a certain extent, as whim or fancy might dictate. Keeping his acquired information for the most part to himself, though occasionally disposing of it, when it turned out both valuable and marketable. It constantly happened that it was not the latter, as Mr. Lightfoot eschewed being brought into contact with the authorities as much as possible. At times, too, the pursuance of the clue necessitated a larger outlay of money than he deemed advisable; and when the chase unmistakably headed out of town, Mr. Lightfoot generally abandoned the pursuit, unless he had a retainer, and now and again he had found such upon his night-lines. Few things he liked better than such applications, and if he made his clients pay for their information, he was very indefatigable in their interests.

"Stop, Etta, what was that you read out for the *Times*," he exclaimed.

"Z, three asterisks, R," repeated his wife, slowly.

"Ah! a bite; 'Z * * * R is requested to drop a line, to say where the advertiser can communicate with him more fully.' What name is opposite those initials?"

"Miss Langworthy, Aldringham, niece of Holbourne, banker thereat."

"I recollect all about it now. Good-looking girl, with a clever face, and something just a little suspicious about her mouth. What can she want? I never fired a more chance shot than that. However, never mind. This is a fish worth landing, Etta.

"In a second back-parlour in Chancery Lane,

Lived a knowing old man, who did always maintain,"

sang Mr. Lightfoot, rubbing his hands cheerfully. A

young lady client of this nature, with a prosperous banker for uncle, seemed like hitting off a vein of gold to the scapegrace adventurer who traded on the follies and passions of humanity. "Etta, my love," he resumed at length, "this is a young lady with a golden relative behind her. She is probably curious upon some point. I delight in administering to the wants of my fellow-creatures, and deem curiosity a most laudable passion. Why should I not appease her thirst for information?—more especially, my Etta, when I look upon her as well able to pay for it. She looked a sharpish young lady, but I don't suppose she comprehends what an expensive amusement she is embarking in. Knowledge of one's neighbour's affairs should always be priced amongst the luxuries of life, and the purveyor of such tidings must be an arrant fool, if he fail to establish an indirect claim, which shall stand him in good stead for many a day to come.'





CHAPTER XV.

PASSION CONQUERS PRUDENCE.

T must not be supposed when that Aldringham rumour was put before Reginald Holbourne in his father's letter, he was not deeply moved thereby—he was furious, angry with the world—angry, although loath to acknowledge it, with himself. His wrath was characterised by all the fierce, hysterical indignation of a woman. He knew how he was betraying this confiding girl, who so implicitly trusted him, with whom his word was law, who made no effort to conceal her love. He knew that day by day, hour by hour, he was winding his way into the very depths of her nature—that already she dressed, read, studied, thought but to please him; that she was gay or sad even as his own fitful mood varied; that his frowns or smiles constituted the clouds or sunshine of her young life. He knew all this, and cursed himself because it was so. Weak he was, but Reginald Holbourne was no libertine. He shuddered to think that Lettice's fair name might be smirched through his imprudence; and yet he perfectly comprehended that, if such fate had not already befallen it, such must be the upshot of their intimacy. He was cheating himself when he pretended not to believe that he had already done her that injustice. In his heart of hearts, he was conscious how men spoke already regarding her.

He suffered much at this time—he was torn by con-

tending emotions; alternately swayed by paroxysms of remorse for the wrong he was doing Lettice; then again swept away entirely by the violence of his passion. Anon he is plunged into the depths of despair, as he reflects upon the impossibility of bursting the fetters that bind him to Marion; and even were that accomplished, how is he to present this unknown, friendless girl, met with in an obscure lodging-house, as his affianced bride to his pompous father? He would have spurned the idea of wronging Lettice, and yet he is stealing all her fresh young heart from her, garnering up all her girlish love, to give in return—what? Is he to tell her, a few weeks hence, that the past is all a dream, and that he is engaged to marry his cousin? Is he to woo her still closer, and leave her blighted, a thing for women to scoff at, for angels to weep over—a flower snapped ere it had fairly bloomed? Reginald would thrust such suggestion down the monitor's throat who should point it out; and yet such sad ending is oftentimes seen to misplaced passion. He carefully avoids all his friends and acquaintances at this time, or else it was impossible but that they should have noticed how ill he looked. His *confrères* in the City remark upon it. His eyes glitter with a feverish light, and exhibit livid rings beneath them. Lettice notes it too, and redoubles her care and attention. She would fain treat him as an invalid, and timidly urges him to seek medical advice. He knows better. His passion and his conscience tear him to pieces in the fierce struggle that rages between them. He is beyond the skill of the physician. Flight!—yes, he must fly; but shall it be from Lettice, or with Lettice? He is drunk with passion; half mad with remorse! Poor child, she half shrinks at times from his ardent gaze; and the blood surges to her temples when her eyes meet his.

But as yet he has suffered no word of love to escape his lips, and hugs to himself this miserable subterfuge as puny consolation for his conduct. He tries unavailingly to stifle the pricks of conscience with the thought that he has given no utterance to the passion that consumes him. Base mockery!—as if his every glance, every

gesture had not wooed Lettice for weeks past, as if he could be blind to how she regarded him.

He looks in on Lettice one morning, as is his wont before starting for the City; he has passed a restless night, consequent upon the intelligence that his people meditate coming to town for three weeks or a month; and a strong presentiment that neither the keen eyes of Marion nor his sister will be blind to the fact that there is something amiss with him. He looks more haggard, seems more nervous and depressed than usual even. Lettice is struck with it, and as she greets him says,

"You look too ill to go to business to-day, Mr. Holbourne. Believe me, you are wrong not to see a doctor, and take some care of yourself."

"Nonsense," he replies, somewhat roughly; "I must go, and there's nothing the matter with me."

"Your hand burns," said the girl. "Will you promise to come home as early as you can, and take me out somewhere? We haven't been into the country for a week," she faltered, "and that always does you good, you know."

Yes, for a whole week he had debarred himself from the pleasure of these country rambles, thinking that by so doing he was smothering his love. For the last few days he had avoided her as much as possible, only to be conscious of her mute look of distress when they met, and the sorrowful appeal of her large earnest eyes as to how she had merited his displeasure. He hesitated, the temptation was great. He knew that to roam over the grass, or sit beneath the spreading branches of the grand old trees in Richmond, Bushy, or Greenwich Parks with her, represented paradise. He struggled to maintain the virtuous resolution he had formed.

"Oh, what have I done," cried Lettice, "that you treat me so unkindly! You have hardly spoken to me all the week. Please tell me my fault. It is only justice, Mr. Holbourne, to let me know wherein I have offended. You know I would not displease you wittingly," and the girl's cheeks flushed, and her mouth quivered in the ardour of her appeal.

He gazed at her a moment as she stood there before

him, her hands loosely clasped, her eyes cast meekly down, awaiting the specification of her misdoings.

"Done! you have done nothing, child. It is I that have been out of sorts, out of temper, harassed, worried."

"Then you are not angry with me?" she exclaimed, as her eyes flashed brightly up into his face, and a smile played about her lips. "Ah, I was so afraid—I did not know how, but I thought that I had offended you!"

"Nonsense, Lettice; I have not been well, that is all."

"Oh yes, I know how selfish I am, but," she continued smiling, "I am so afraid of getting into disgrace with you. You sometimes scold me, and that I don't mind, but you must never be angry with me without scolding. You won't, will you?"

"No, you foolish child, and we will go for a run to-day. It will be good for both of us," replied Reginald, his prudential resolutions scattered to the winds. "Mind you have your bonnet on by half-past four."

"Delightful!" cried the girl, clapping her hands. "If I have done amiss I know I shall be forgiven now. Where shall we go?"

"Think. I must be off, and you shall tell me when I return."

Lettice sat for some time after Reginald had left her wrapped in thought. No unpleasant dream-land that, I ween, into which her fancy wandered, if the shining light in her eyes, and happy smile on her lips, may be deemed indication of a maiden's mind. She was beginning to awake to the fact that Reginald Holbourne was all the world to her. She did not attempt to disguise it to herself—she acknowledged she loved him. Did he love her? She did not know; she thought so, she hoped so, but then he was so far above her! And then romantic Lettice reflected that King Cophetua loved the beggar-maid, and had not Helena won Bertram at last? Did not Ferdinand woo Miranda, not knowing her a Princess? And did not all the old romancers tell that love was lord of all? She was so happy in her new-born love, that she gave but little thought of what might come of it. If Reginald would but confess that he loved her, that was all she wished for at present. Reginald! she murmured

the name softly to herself twice or thrice—would the time ever come when she should dare address him thus? But she was wasting time sadly; this would never do—she must see to her wardrobe. She must look her very best when she was to go out with him. He was dreadfully particular, and dressing for one of these excursions was matter of as much thought and perturbation to Lettice as a toilette for the Queen's ball is to some of her aristocratic sisters. Then she had to settle where they were to go, and Reginald always expected her to know all about the trains; and, with these reflections. Lettice jumped to her feet, and began to be very busy indeed.

First, she explained to her grandfather that Mr. Holbourne had offered to take her out for a trip into the country, and asked his permission. Little difficulty about that. The old gentleman thought little about anything unconnected with his own comforts. He was lapped in the egotism that is so constantly educed by the infirmities of age—more especially when conjoined with indifferent health.

"Very well, Lettice," he replied. "I am glad to think of your getting a little pleasure at odd times—it is somewhat dull for you here, child. But I can't have my dinner put off—I can't be kept waiting for you to come home."

"No, grandfather dear, I will see about all that. Sarah shall bring up your dinner at the usual time; and, as for me, I daresay I shall manage to find a crust of bread-and-butter and some tea later."

"Ay, that will do. I hope you will have a pleasant afternoon." And the old man once more resumed his study of the paper.

"Grandfather dear, will you let me have a little money, please?" said Lettice, timidly, as she seated herself on a stool at his feet.

"Money!—and what may you want with money? I presume Mr. Holbourne doesn't call upon *you* to pay for cabs or railway fares on these occasions?" And the old man peered suspiciously down upon her.

"No, indeed," faltered Lettice, as she coloured painfully; "I'm afraid he knows the emptiness of my purse

but too well. But, grandfather, there are articles of dress that I must have. I want some gloves, for one thing."

"Gloves! What does it signify whether a child like you has gloves or not?"

"You forget I'm not far from seventeen years old," retorted Lettice, defiantly; "and people begin to think us young women at that age."

"Seventeen years old, you monkey? How time passes!—I'd never have thought it. And now, just like your mother before you, you want to scatter my gear to trick yourself out in gews and gauds, in ribbons and laces. Go to, wench!"

"Nay, grandfather, I'm sure it's seldom I come to you. It is but little I spend on my dress—no girl could manage upon less than I do. But you must let me have a sovereign now."

"D'ye think I'm made of gold, girl?—or have share in the sands of Pactolus? An' I be not guarded of my gold,

'In spite
Of all my thrift and care, I'll grow behindhand.'"

Things looked ill for Lettice's request, but that young lady was cognisant of a pet weakness of her grandfather's. For a second she paused, and then, with a smile of mock humility, made answer—

" 'We, ignorant of ourselves,
Beg often our own harms, which the wise powers
Deny us for our good.'"

But nevertheless, grandfather, pleasure me in this thing, I pray you."

"Aptly quoted, wench!—well put!" exclaimed the old man, in great delight. "But mark me, Lettice, this must last you a long time—it's gold, child, and gold waxes hard to come by."

A quarter-past four sees Lettice in gipsy-hat and dainty muslin robe, sitting at the window, anxiously awaiting Reginald's return. Thanks to her quick memory and knowledge of her grandfather's weakness, her hands are neatly gloved. The girl's eyes sparkle with anticipation of pleasure, and glance impatiently from the street to the timepiece. Shall this day and that apt quat:

recur to her memory in days to come?—who knows? No anticipation of evil clouds the bright, eager young face at present. The sorrows of the future are as yet mercifully locked in the womb of Time. At last she catches sight of him, and runs to open the door.

"Ready, Lettice!" he exclaimed—"come along, then. What a punctual little girl it is!" and he looked fondly down upon her as she slipped her hand beneath his arm. "And where are we bound for?"

"Let us go to Richmond, and stroll along by the river, or wander in the park—whichever you like best. It is all beautiful down there, and we can forget hot, dusty Baker Street for two or three hours."

So to Richmond they wended their way. Reginald felt a thrill of exultation run through his veins as he noticed the glances of admiration that were more than once bestowed upon his fair companion. Weak and unstable of character, even in his love he would fain be endorsed by the world's opinion—would wish that men should deem the object of his worship peerless among women. To-day he has thrown aside all scruples of conscience, and given himself up wholly to the enjoyment of the hour. They have wandered about the park till they are tired, and have now seated themselves on the soft, velvety turf, beneath the shade of a gnarled old oak.

"Have you no relations beyond your grandfather, Lettice?" he asks, lazily, at last.

"Not that I know of," replied the girl, slowly. "I had a sister four or five years older than myself, but she married, and died shortly afterwards. I loved her very dearly, but never saw her but once after she left us."

"Have you never seen your brother-in-law since?"

"No," said Lettice, musingly. "He was very kind to me, and used to make rather a pet of me when he was courting Lilian. I think sometimes it is perhaps grandfather's fault. You know, Mr. Holbourne, he is very fond of money. I was hardly old enough to learn the rights of the story, but either my brother-in-law wanted money, or, what is quite as likely, grandfather fancied he might, and so gave him scant encouragement to come and see us. It was perhaps that, but I don't know," and

Lettice absently pulled to pieces some wild flowers she had plucked.

"Then, if anything happened to your grandfather, you would be all alone in the world?" said Reginald.

"All alone," she murmured, sadly. "Ah! Mr. Holbourne," she continued, as the tears welled to her eyes, "it is cruel to remind me of how desolate I may be ere long!"

"No, Lettice," he whispered, in deep, passionate tones, as he drew her to him—"never alone in this world while I live. I love you, Lettice—love you so dearly that to lose you would be to lose the sun of my existence—to leave life a blank—to canker the very current of my blood! I never told you so in words, but you have known it for weeks past. Say, dearest, I do not woo in vain."

She hid her face upon his shoulder for a few seconds as she yielded to his embrace; then raising it, roseate with blushes, murmured simply "I love you," and surrendered her lips to his passionate kiss.

"There," he exclaimed, as he released her. "Mine now, Lettice, come weal, come woe; are you not?"

"Come weal, come woe," she faltered, in low tones and with downcast eyes.

She could scarce trust herself as yet to speak; she was afraid to let him see the rapturous light that glistened in her eyes. She took shame to herself that she had abandoned her lips to him so readily. The blood surged madly through her veins, and she feared that he might even detect the wild pulsations of her heart.

They sat silent for some little time, her hand locked in his. The declaration of pent-up passion had at last burst its bonds, and neither was inclined to speak. The fierce impetuosity of his love had infected her, and she trembled at her own happiness.

"Come, Lettice," he said at length, "it is getting time to go;" and as he raised her from the ground he once more clasped her in his arms.

"Oh! please don't, Mr. Holbourne," she whispered. "Let me go."

"You don't deserve it," he replied. "Say Reginald."

She raised her lips to his for a moment, then, murmuring shyly "Please, Reginald," slipped from his embrace.

Slowly they sauntered back to the station, but little conversation passed between them. Reginald Holbourne, at the height of his passion for Marion, had never found himself tongue-tied, and now he seemed to have no words to bestow on this girl whose love he had won—a love, too, that thrilled through his every pulse in a manner all unknown to that first passion of his youth. Lettice, however, seemed quite content; her heart was too full for speech, and Reginald felt her little hand flutter as he gave her his arm through the crowd.

"I won't come in to see your grandfather to-night, darling," said Holbourne, when they again arrived in Baker Street. "I shall go to my own den, and dream over my happiness. Good night, Lettice, my own."

"Good night," she whispered, and with a shy little nod disappeared.





CHAPTER XVI.

AN AWKWARD MISTAKE.



DEMANDEZ ma voiture !”

“Le *ma* est l’accomplissement du mariage. Pendant deux ans on a dit la voiture de Monsieur, la voiture, notre voiture, et enfin ma voiture.” So saith Balzac. But woman is at no loss to insinuate such authority over her male surroundings, although not fortified by the chains of matrimony ; old bachelors have been but as tops in the hands of termagant housekeepers ere now, more sleepy and less mutinous in proportion to their scourging ; while mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, &c., have reduced widowers to complete subjection in two years and demanded “my carriage” when it seemed good to them.

Miss Langworthy had ruled her uncle’s house now for four years, and, I need scarcely add, at the present time exercised perfectly despotic sway therein. The banker, good, easy man, at times fussed and fidgeted, and made a feeble demonstration of domineering over his own establishment, but it imposed upon nobody but himself. The servants knew perfectly well that master’s bluster was as nothing in comparison with the calm, cutting reprimands of his niece—that Mr. Holbourne’s wrath evaporated in stormy, incoherent reproof ; but that when Miss Langworthy found fault, something was wont to

come of it. Marion would dedicate herself to the persecution of an offending housemaid with an assiduity worthy of a better cause.

Of late she had been rather disturbed by the rebellious spirit manifested by her cousin. Grace was perfectly aware of how Marion usurped the position that of right belonged to herself. She was now old enough to make a stand against Miss Langworthy's dictatorial edicts, and more especially did she now wage fierce internecine war on the subject of "*ma voiture*." She claimed equal disposition of the carriage with her cousin, and flatly declined to abate one particle of such privilege. Marion was much annoyed at this disaffection in her domestic kingdom, and felt rancorously disposed towards Grace in consequence. She could hardly expect her uncle to interfere in the matter, to the prejudice of his own daughter—that daughter, moreover, only laying claim to a half when she was fairly entitled to a whole.

It had been Grace's growing intimacy with Sylla Collingham that had given rise to this difference between them. Grace continually wanted the carriage to go to Churton. Miss Langworthy detested Churton; she did not get on either with Sylla or Sir John, and from experience she knew that she was much more likely to see Robert Collingham in Aldringham than at Churton. A sharp passage of arms had taken place between the cousins on the subject, whereby Miss Langworthy made two disagreeable discoveries, to wit, that her monopoly of the carriage was at an end, and that Grace could successfully assert her independence. These seemed positive injuries to Marion's mind; she brooded over them at times with feelings much the reverse of friendly towards her cousin.

Robert Collingham, meanwhile, continued his visits to the banker's house. He was quite an *habitué* there now, and they saw him fully four days out of the seven. Aldringham was not likely to overlook such fair cause of gossip, but varied much in opinion as to which it was of the young ladies that so attracted him. While one portion of the town held that he wooed Miss Holbourne, the other declared that his attentions were directed to

her cousin. Marion was herself at times somewhat perplexed upon the subject, but of late, upon discovering that Grace's absence produced apparently little effect upon him—that he was quite as willing to sit, talk, and have tea with her, and that the non-appearance of Miss Holbourne led to no more than courteous inquiry concerning her, and a civil message of regret at not seeing her—Marion had come to the conclusion that these visits were meant exclusively for her fair self.

Miss Langworthy was gifted with quite her share of vanity, yet she appraised her attractions in by no means an extravagant manner. If she held her personal charms rather higher than circumstances quite warranted, she laid far more stress upon her tact and talent of making the very best of herself in every way. She knew well that a woman who could talk pleasantly, and help men out in the making of conversation, oftentimes distanced her handsomer sisters in the race matrimonial. She had seen many a beauty with all the men at her feet upon first coming out, and marked how short such sway held power, unless the pretty face had something behind it. Boys' heads were still turned, it was true, but those of more mature growth and understanding soon tired of such doll's flesh. Marion knew that few who had once paid court to her ever failed in their allegiance; and it was knowledge of this that filled her breast at times with bitter indignation against Reginald Holbourne. He, she felt, was bound to her by faint ties of affection now. True, she cared in reality nothing about him; but that did not the less prevent her resenting his defalcation. She took a malicious pleasure in making him feel his chains at times, although she had slight idea of ever marrying him.

Marion had, in sooth, good reason to suppose herself the magnet that attracted Robert Collingham. Even when Grace was present, it was to Miss Langworthy that he principally addressed his conversation. Robert Collingham was deemed heavy among men. He could talk sensibly enough if the conversation ran in those two grooves, agriculture or shooting, in which his life was bound up; but outside them he was mute. Now, that

ingenious idea of *Punch* with which Mr. Collingham had opened his undefined siege in the banker's drawing-room, although it had done him yeoman's service in the preliminary skirmishing, of course proved inadequate as his visits waxed of greater length. But when Miss Langworthy had finally determined that this devotion was meant for herself, that it was at her altar that such incense was burnt, she devoted herself nobly to his assistance. This ingenious young lady took to reading the *Agricultural Journal*, and divers other works of a similar character, and, by airing the knowledge thus acquired, made conversation both easy and interesting for her admirer. Mr. Collingham was delighted; he got quite animated upon one occasion, and was so carried away by Miss Langworthy's critical remarks upon the double plough that he declared he must speak to Sir John about letting her a farm.

"Hum," mused Marion, after his departure, "this scientific talk is not favourable to flirtation. If he'd talk to Sir John about letting me a husband, 'twould be more to the purpose. I presume that at last is to be the issue of his bucolic mind. Ah! me, it's weary work when one has to do so much of the wooing oneself."

And then her thoughts reverted to those bygone days when Reginald was at her feet, and she bitterly contrasted his wild, boyish devotion with the phlegmatic attentions of her present admirer. Had she tried to keep that love? No; in all honesty, Marion was fain to confess to herself that, though she had been at some pains to maintain their engagement, she had exercised little industry to keep alight the fire which had once burnt so fiercely.

It is a delicious Summer morning. The hum of the bees and the fragrance of the flowers come pleasantly through the open window, at which Grace Holbourne sits reading, or to speak, perhaps, more accurately, musing. Her book lies in her lap unheeded, although the slender fingers still keep mark of the page. Miss Langworthy is busily engaged writing letters at a Davenport, and the scratching of her pen alone breaks the silence. Suddenly the door opens, and the banker appears—apparition most unusual at that hour in that apartment. His countenance flashed

with gratified pride; he flourishes the double gold eyeglass with much magnificence—his whole form is swelling with self-importance. His tall, portly figure positively dilates with the intelligence of which he is bearer. Marion at a glance sees that her uncle is overflowing with some subject tending to his self-glorification, and patiently awaits the unfolding thereof. Grace, too, although by no means so quick at reading her father as Miss Langworthy, speedily discerns that he is in a state of great jubilation, from some cause or another.

"Ha! girls," he exclaimed, jocularly, "what for my news this morning, eh?"

"That would be to buy a pig in a poke, indeed, uncle," retorted Marion. "It may be that consols are down, which concerns us little. It may be that discount is raised, which concerns us less."

"It may be that you bring new dresses, which concerns us much; or new ornaments which concerns us more," cried Grace, laughing.

"Faith, child, that's not altogether a bad shot of yours. If I don't bring silks or jewels, I bring that which leads to both," replied Mr. Holbourne. "A welcome gift to most young ladies at any time."

"And that is?" inquired Marion.

"A husband!"

"What?" exclaimed Grace.

"A husband! It's a doosid flattering thing, and a handsome tribute to my position in the country, to find a good old county family like the Collinghams seeking an alliance with mine. I'm quite aware, my dears, that your own charms are quite sufficient warranty for young men falling in love with either of you, but of course they would feel also that William Holbourne is rather a desirable relation to count upon in these parts. I think," he continued, with facetious humility, the name is not altogether unknown in Aldringham and the surrounding neighbourhood."

The banker paused, and played with his eyeglass, as, with half-shut eyes, and benignant smile, he took an introspective view of his own importance.

"Of course," he continued, gazing apparently at the

mantelpiece, and speaking more as if soliloquising than addressing himself to either lady, "I should never dream of asserting any authority of mine on a point like this. It is obviously my duty to point out that a man like Robert Collingham is a desirable *parti*; that he is of a good family, good position and of fair means; that he in due course will take yet higher position. Still, if you have any objection to view him in the light of a husband——"

"Then Robert Collingham has asked your consent to pay his addresses, uncle," interposed Miss Langworthy, with a pout. "He might have known in these days that it is more usual to obtain the lady's consent first on such a subject." And Marion tossed her head with much consciousness.

Grace, meanwhile, contemplated this announcement with grave interest. She was quite aware how unsuited Marion was to her brother, and suspected that very little love existed between them at present. What would Marion do? Would she have the hardihood to boldly throw Reginald over in the presence of his sister? How stupid it was of her father not to have made this announcement to Marion alone! As it was, she felt in the delicate position of being looker-on in a conference at which it was most desirable she should not be present.

"I don't agree with you, Marion," replied Mr. Holbourne, pompously. "It may be the custom in these levelling days, but I think Mr. Collingham is perfectly right. I am old-fashioned enough to consider that the head of the family is the first to be consulted in a matter that so nearly concerns him."

Miss Langworthy saw that she had made a mistake—that she had ruffled the feathers of the banker's self-importance.

"Excuse me, uncle," she replied; "it is no doubt right that it should be so; but girls," she continued, smiling, "can't help feeling a little jealous when the avowal is not made to them in the first instance. We take it ill that men should dare ask our hands from anyone but ourselves."

"Well, I daresay you don't quite mean as much as you

say, Marion; but Robert Collingham's is an offer worth consideration. What am I to say to him Grace?"

"Grace!" ejaculated Miss Langworthy, as the blood flew to the very roots of her hair.

"I, father!" exclaimed Miss Holbourne, in blank astonishment—"why, what have I to do with it?"

"Do with it, girl! Why, when I tell you as plainly as I can speak that Robert Collingham asks you to be his wife, I should fancy you had a good deal to do with it."

"Ask me, father! You mistake, your message is for Marion."

"Not at all, Grace," exclaimed Miss Langworthy, quickly. "I have foreseen his proposal was imminent for some time, my dear. Pray allow me to offer my congratulations, and leave you to arrange matters with your father." And darting a most malignant look at her cousin, Marion swept out of the room.

"Old idiot!" she muttered between her clenched teeth, as the door closed behind her; "to think how he has made me commit myself, and to know that my chit of a cousin saw it all! That I, Marion Langworthy, who deemed she had a head upon her shoulders, should have been made a mere catpaw of! But take heed, the three of you," she continued, as the hot, angry tears of shame and vexation started to her eyes; "you shall find Marion ill to jest with—albeit you have fooled her this time."

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Grace, as the door closed—"how could you lead her into such a trap!"

Mr. Holbourne was dimly conscious that he had conducted his embassy badly. Despite her efforts to control herself, he had not been blind to his niece's flushed face and indignant exit.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed—"why, what is the matter?"

"Can't you see, father? Marion thought, as she had good right to think, that Robert Collingham's proposal was addressed to her. He has paid her far more attention than he ever did me."

"God bless me!" exclaimed the banker; "and I thought I had put it so perfectly clear before you."

"But you did not, father; until you had mentioned my name, I had no idea but what it was to Marion you were speaking."

"Now don't be absurd, Grace. You and Marion of course had come to a foregone conclusion on the subject, and therefore had made up your minds as to whom Robert Collingham's proposal would be addressed; but as for telling me, a magistrate of nearly twenty years standing, and a man of business to boot, that I can't put a case lucidly, it's too ridiculous."

"Well, father," replied Grace, "the fact remains the same; we did misunderstand you, and I am afraid you have caused Marion much annoyance."

"I am sorry for that," returned Mr. Holbourne, "very sorry, I should be grieved to wound Marion's feelings; but, at the same time, what am I to say to Robert Collingham? His message is to you, Grace. Let us have no further misunderstandings."

"Tell him, please, that I am very sensible of the honour that he has shown me, but that it cannot be."

"Don't be foolish, child. It's a good match for you. Think over it till to-morrow before you say him nay."

"If I thought over it till doomsday, I should never say him otherwise," retorted Grace, decidedly. "You may tell him so when you please;" and to evade further converse on the subject, Miss Holbourne made her escape into the garden.

And what all this time were Marion's reflections? She had betaken herself to her own room, and shutting herself in with her wrath had sat down to think. Bitterer meditation seldom fell to the lot of maiden. She who was wont to hold her head high, had stooped to angle for a man's good will, only to find herself tricked, and her cousin whom she held in slight esteem preferred before her. Then she had but little doubt that Reginald was playing her false, and bestowing on another the love solemnly plighted to her. True, she had been just as ready to prove false to her vows as he could be, and she had as yet, moreover, nothing but mere rumour on which to accuse him of infidelity. Still in Marion's eyes her jilting him was a thing to laugh at, while the converse

was a crime which called upon the gods for vengeance. Then, again, Marion was a woman who loved power, and she viewed with some dismay and much dislike Grace's calm but gradual assertion of her actual position. Miss Langworthy felt that the domestic sceptre was slipping from her grasp. She ground her white teeth as she mused over all these things, and gradually worked herself into a feeling of extreme rancour as regarded three people—to wit, Grace, Reginald, and Robert Collingham.

"As sure as there is a sun in heaven, Grace and Robert Collingham shall pay dear for this morning's work!" muttered Marion at last, with an angry stamp of her foot. "She will be out of my way if she marries him, and one path to vengeance open to me at once. 'Twould be best so. He may wed her from prudential motives, but I don't think he will altogether forget that the hours sped lightly in my society. He will stoop to my lure again, I fancy; and if so, be it my business to see the matrimonial shackles sit none too easy. As for Reginald, I must first have clear proof of his guilt. Time enough then to think of fitting punishment for the offence. I can, I suppose, do nothing regarding this till we go to town. We all lie glib enough on paper. Stop! Where did I put that eccentric epistle I received at the Fancy Fair. It's a mere chance, but the man declared himself a detective. I'll try him; he shall ascertain who this light-o'-love of Reginald's is, if he can."

The result of these reflections was that Mr. Lightfoot found a nibble at one of his night lines, as we have already seen.





CHAPTER XVII.

ORDERED ABROAD.

REGINALD HOLBOURNE, the morning after that Richmond excursion, springs from a bed of roses to confront once more this world's dull realities. He had fallen asleep lulled by the sweet consciousness that Lettice loved him—that the words that bound them irrevocably to each other had been at last spoken—that the struggle between his conscience and his passion was over—that he had won the girl in whom his whole being was wrapped up.

But reflection comes with the dawn, and the roses of evening are apt to develop their thorns by daylight. As he goes through man's grimmest matutinal task, the operation of shaving—when, looking our worst, we are compelled to confront ourselves, and meditate upon the lines that sins and advancing years have written upon our countenances—he muses in troubled fashion upon his complications. Of course he must break with Marion now—but how? The letter that is to carry that intelligence does not seem quite so easy to pen as he had deemed it last night. How is he to put it? What is he to say? This new love of his will hardly be an eligible excuse for the breaking of that long-plighted troth. And then Reginald feels bitter shame at the idea of throwing over a girl whose love he had won as an heiress, now that she is but slenderly endowed with this

world's gear. He need have little compunction, did he know all; but then, that is precisely what he does not know, and he believes Marion thoroughly true to her engagement.

Well, he thinks there is no necessity for writing that letter to-day. Like most weak men, he takes comfort in the idea of procrastination. Something may turn up—of a verity something will turn up, that shall make him regret such procrastination for many a long day. A jealous, irritated woman, stung to madness by recent disappointment, is even now searching into the truth of the story so current already at Aldringham, and her emissary will have scant trouble about striking the trail. Better he should make a clean breast, did he but know it, than live to learn of what an outraged woman can be capable. When they are of a type as cool, clever, and unscrupulous as Marion Langworthy, the beverage produced by such brewings is wont to be bitter in the mouth.

Anon, Reginald begins to think upon what he is to do regarding Lettice. He is pretty nearly dependent upon his father, as far as income goes, his salary in the City at present being a very small affair. That his pompous father, with his exaggerated notions about his own position, would listen for one moment to the idea of his marrying a girl with neither money nor family, was scarcely probable. Nothing should induce him to give up Lettice; and yet he was quite aware that, if this business came to Mr. Holbourne's ears, and he should persist, in defiance of his father's wishes, in adhering to his engagement, it was more than likely that his allowance would be withdrawn.

The more he thought over things, the more unpleasant they seemed, and it was with a moody brow that he descended the stairs. The door of the ground-floor parlour stood open; he entered, and Lettice, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, and her cheeks glowing with blushes, advanced to meet him.

"Reginald," she said shyly—"I'm almost afraid to call you so as yet—I couldn't let you go without seeing you this morning. Was it all a dream yesterday, or did you tell me you loved me?"

"I told you so yesterday, and tell you so again this morning, darling," he replied, as he clasped her in his arms and kissed her; "and mean to tell you so for ever, as long as I have breath wherewith to give it utterance."

"Ah!" said the girl, as she looked fondly up into his face, "it is true, then, and not a fevered vision of the night? I am yours, and you are mine—my very own, Reginald."

"Yes, sweet, 'an ill-favoured thing, child, but thine own,' as your grandfather would say. Are you sorry, Lettice, that you gave away your heart in Richmond Park yesterday?"

"No, I am proud and pleased I did so. But I think you had it before, if all were told."

"Well, child, that is a confession you shall make to me this afternoon. 'For which of my good parts you did first suffer love for me?' Your grandfather's talk is catching, Lettice—he leads me into quotation, as he did into reading the dramatists. Mind you have your bonnet on by half-past four. For the present good-bye." And, snatching another kiss, Reginald Holbourne took his departure in far more jubilant spirits than those with which he had descended the stairs.

Fair to gaze upon is Lettice as she sits curled up in the window this Summer morning, her masses of dark hair skilfully coiled round her head, and deftly kept within bounds by a bright blue ribbon, a smile playing on her lips, and the dark luminous eyes glowing with the happy light of assured love. She is not thinking in the least of the future; the present suffices her amply. She supposes Reginald will marry her before long; but in the meantime he loves her, and she is going for a ramble with him this afternoon—what more can she want? Love him?—oh! yes—does she not truly and honestly? And then Lettice amuses herself trying to puzzle out how it was she first lost her heart to him? And the psychological question occupies her for near upon an hour. Commend me to those under the influences of the god. Sweeter warrant for all folly shall never be quoted. Sad it is when our hearts wax callous, and laugh

to scorn the arrows of Eros, when, alas! we no longer vow the grandest scene of ancient history was

“Actium, lost for Cleopatra’s eyes.”

We may be wiser, we may be richer, we may be better, but the golden hours have departed never more to return. I have always thought that Anthony was more blessed than is common to mortals. The power to love lasted long with him, and he perished in the hey-day of his passion.

But there are ever links in love’s flowery chain, and, to Lettice’s dismay, her grandfather insisted upon it that she should accompany him to the Regent’s Park that afternoon. The girl strove hard to evade this arrangement, but the old gentleman was peremptory, and she did not quite like to tell him that Reginald had promised to take her out. She felt angry with herself for not stating so boldly—and yesterday it had been easy to do so; but now he was her avowed lover. Lettice’s heart fluttered as she thought of it, and her lips seemed less glib with his name than they were wont to be. What was she to do? She did not like to confess how matters stood between them to **her** grandfather, until she had Reginald’s permission to do so. And yet he might feel hurt if she failed in her tryst; so she scribbled a little timid note, telling him where she was gone, hoping he would not be cross with her, “for indeed she could not help it,” and would he follow them? Having entrusted this to the servant, with stringent injunctions that it was to be given into Mr. Holbourne’s hands the moment he returned, Lettice set off with her grandfather on the proposed walk.

Before they had got twenty paces from the door they encountered a well-dressed man, with somewhat *retroussé* nose and keen grey eyes, who regarded them attentively as he courteously made way for them.

“Hum!” he muttered, after they had passed. “That’s the young lady, I’ll lay a guinea to a gooseberry. My esteemed client, fair though you be, if you suspect a rival in Mr. Holbourne’s affections, you have good cause to feel somewhat uncomfortable. I should fancy your thirst for information springs from that amiable weakness

called jealousy. However, now to prosecute inquiries. A stroke of luck seeing the lady to start with. Yes, no doubt about it, this is the door they came out of." And without further ceremony he rang the bell.

"You let lodgings, I think?" said Mr. Lightfoot, airy, as the maid-servant appeared.

"Yes, sir; but we are quite full at present."

"Mr. Holbourne lives here, does he not?"

"Yes, sir; but he ain't in just now. Shall I tell him you called?"

"No. I understood the gentleman and his daughter, Mr.—Good gracious, I've forgotten his name!" And here Mr. Lightfoot knit his brows anxiously.

"Mr. Cheslett, you mean, sir, who has the parlours?"

"Exactly. I thought he was about to give up his rooms?"

"Oh! no, sir. He has only just gone out; you must have passed him, if you'd known."

"True, I did pass an old military gentleman and his daughter."

"Bless you, sir, he ain't an officer, any more than Miss Lettice is his daughter."

"Excuse me, Major Cheslett and his daughter, I was informed, were the people about to give up their apartments."

"Well, he don't call himself Major, or Captain, or anything else of that sort; and as for Miss Lettice, why, she's his granddaughter, everyone knows." And Sarah quite grinned at the ignorance of the inquirer.

That the world is small there is no doubt, and I often hear my wandering friends complain of their inability to cut themselves off from the ken of their acquaintance; but we all suffer in our turns from the pith of Sarah's last observation. Unless you never change your own social tramway for another, you must have, at some time in your life, been covered with confusion at not knowing "the great Craggs." Every stratum of society is more or less cursed with its Craggs—in forty-nine cases out of fifty the most miserable fetish ever worshipped. Sarah's idea of a Craggs was much sweeter and more justifiable than such as usually does duty for that wretched mock

idol. She looked upon Lettice as the dominant goddess of her little world, and felt pity and disdain for this unfortunate who was so ignorant of her history.

"Then you have nothing at all to let at present?" said Mr. Lightfoot.

"No, sir."

"Thank you; I must try elsewhere." And with an affable nod to Sarah Mr. Lightfoot took his departure, having acquired all the information he sought without the slightest difficulty.

Marion's instructions had been curt and business-like in the extreme. She gave him Reginald's address. He was to ascertain whether a young lady lived in that house; if so, who she was, what she was, whether young or good-looking. Equally short and business-like was the missive despatched by that night's post to Miss Langworthy.

"I have made the inquiries you desired. The ground-floor of No.—, Baker Street, is occupied by an old gentleman named Cheslett and his granddaughter. The young lady appears to be about seventeen, and is an extremely handsome brunette, by name Lettice. Awaiting your further instructions, I have the honour to be, &c.,

"Your most obedient servant,

"LEONIDAS LIGHTFOOT."

Reginald Holbourne experienced infinite disgust upon his return from the City, when, instead of finding Lettice herself waiting for him, he only found her note. I am afraid he referred to the venerable Cheslett in terms very far from complimentary. Sarah had a confused idea of catching such muttered commentary on that note as "Imbecile old mummy!" "Exacting old idiot!" &c., and wondered not a little what it was that had put "the drawing-rooms," as she denominated him, so much out of temper. That observing and gossiping damsel had for some time made up her mind that "the drawing-rooms" and the "parlours" would make a match of it. She looked upon it as a very fitting arrangement. She had, as before said, much reverence for Lettice, while Reginald was the only young gentleman that she had knowledge

of whom she deemed at all worthy to aspire to Miss Cheslett's hand. Sarah, putting her own construction on the note, and this grumbling commentary, came to the conclusion that Grandpapa Cheslett had demanded Mr. Holbourne's intentions, "which it's getting time they was spoke out and acknowledged publicly," observed that damsel to herself in conclusion. Sarah was more cognizant of how Lettice was committing herself with Reginald Holbourne than either Mr. Cheslett or his granddaughter.

Crushing the offending note in his hands, Reginald made his way rapidly towards the Regent's Park, and was not long before he descried the pair he sought seated on a bench, in the straight double avenue that leads up to the territory of the wild beasts. Lettice greeted him with a blush, and a somewhat anxious look, as he saluted them.

"Shall we go into the gardens, Mr. Cheslett," asked Reginald, "and have a look at the hippopotami and monkeys?"

The old man's face brightened.

"Yes," he replied. "I rather like watching the animals; they amuse me. And when you come to my time of life, Mr. Holbourne, you will find that there is not much that does. Sign, perchance, I draw toward my dotage. 'Thou'dst shun a bear,' but I love to see him climb his rugged pole, court popularity, and beg for buns. It reminds me of what I once was."

Reginald rather anxiously waited for further disclosures on Mr. Cheslett's part. He was extremely curious concerning the old gentleman's antecedents; but Mr. Cheslett vouchsafed no further remark.

"You are not angry with me?" whispered Lettice.

"No, child, why should I be? Disappointment though it is not to have you all to myself to-day."

"Ah! that's good of you," returned the girl, in a low voice, as she slipped her little hand through his arm. "I was so afraid you might think it my fault."

They wandered down the Zoological Gardens. Mr. Cheslett stopped in solemn contemplation of the Polar bear, and let fall a remark that strengthened Reginald's suspicion as to his original calling.

"Queer brute!" he muttered. "He's like a third-rate tragedian. He never stops 'taking the stage.'"

To the uninitiated I may remark, that this means crossing it from right to left, or *vice versâ*, in front of the other performers thereon.

"Lettice, my own," said Reginald, as, leaving the old gentleman to study the white bear and the hyænas, they strolled a little apart from him, "I have a bit of disagreeable intelligence to break to you."

She said nothing, but he felt the clasp upon his arm tighter as the big black eyes looked anxiously up at him.

"I have to go away and leave you for a little while. The firm want to send a confidential agent to Frankfort, and they have selected me."

"Oh, Reginald!" she murmured, "it won't be for long, will it?"

"No. I should fancy not above a month at the outside. It's very disgusting, that just as I have acquired a right to call you my own, I should have to leave you."

"And you don't think a month long!" exclaimed the girl. "Are you sure you love me?" And she stopped and peered curiously into his face. "No, don't speak," she continued, "I have my answer, and know you do; but they will be weary weeks, Reginald, all the same."

"Yes, pet, for me at all events. But, Lettice, I must not refuse. It is a high compliment the being selected for this business, and will probably lead to further advancement. I must consider how I am to earn bread and cheese for my little wife that is to be, remember."

She "blinkit sae sweet in his face," as Joanna Baillie's grand old song says, and then whispered, "I forgot that. But you will write to your little wife, won't you?"

"Yes, pelt her with letters till she hates the sight of my handwriting."

"Ah, that will take some time," replied Lettice, smiling; "but as long as I hear from you now and then, and may send you sheets of my own foolish scribble, it will not be so bad."

"Sheets of your inditing, child, I shall look forward to. I wonder whether you will weary of mine? They may, perchance, prove the more voluminous of the two."

"As if that were likely! You will be busy, occupied with fifty things; while I shall have nothing left me but to wait, write, and it may be weep."

"You foolish Lettice, what should you have to weep about?"

"Nothing, except that I cry when I am sad, and that is like enough to happen when you leave me," she replied, with a faint smile.

But here Mr. Cheslett rejoined them, and suggested that it was getting time to wend their way back to Baker Street; and as the old gentleman waxed somewhat garrulous on the road, Lettice achieved no further *tête-à-tête* with her lover.





CHAPTER XVIII.

AMONG THE FRIARS.

“AND he left no card, Polly?” inquired Jim Donaldson.

“No,” replied Miss Meggott; “he left nothing but a flavour of unparalleled impudence behind him, and, thanks to the training I’ve had, I should be a judge of that article, at all events.”

“Oh, mine Araminta of the ebon hair!” ejaculated Collingham. “Oh, for a tithe of this vagrant’s insolence, that I might warble my love to thee!”

‘ Say, dearest, say, while the moments are flying,
While I sing my sweetest—like swans that are dying.
Say, love, oh, say, what exactly escapes me; ’

“I don’t know precisely what, but it’s something or other makes me.”

“You be quiet, Mr. Collingham,” replied Miss Meggott, with a humorous twinkle of her eyes, “or you’ll find yourself cast for damages before long.”

“Never mind, Polly, I should report the case myself; and we’d write some good comic love-letters here, wouldn’t we?—and have a rattling leader on the trial afterwards. Not a bad idea, O Queen of the Ever-so-many Islands.”

“So he was dissatisfied with his mutton chop, was he?” asked Donaldson.

“Dissatisfied!” rejoined Polly, tossing her head.

"He had the impertinence to ask whether it came from the boot-maker's, and was cooked by the young gentleman who attended to the blacking department. It wasn't a very good chop, maybe, but he took us aback. I ran out and did the best I could, but I had to take what I could get at the nearest butcher's; and mother made the best she was able of a bad fire. I don't think it was a success," continued Polly, "but it was pretty cool of him letting out in the way he did. When I got him the sherry——"

"Ah!" exclaimed Donaldson.

"He asked if that was what you drank yourselves, so I told him Yes. 'Got from the nearest public-house, I should think, and laid in by the bottle,' he remarked, after tasting it. 'Perhaps, as I happen to have a wife dependent upon me, you'd run out and get me a pint of the more humble but less deleterious half-and-half.'"

"Well, and what happened next?" inquired Collingham.

"Why, he took one of your cigars, lit it, and, after a few whiffs, said, 'I can't wait any longer. Tell your master he's a fool to go on smoking this rubbish at six and thirty shillings a pound—that he had better smoke less and pay rather more. It will improve both his health and his comedies.' I ventured to suggest that you were pretty well, and that the comedies drew pretty fair houses, as it was."

"And what did he say to that?" asked Donaldson.

"Well, he smiled grimly, and replied that there was nothing like giving free vent to your sentiments, and that, as those were mine, I had better blazon them on two boards, get between them, and perambulate the Strand."

A burst of laughter from her auditors here interrupted Polly.

"Yes, you may well grin," said Miss Meggott, a little tartly; then, suddenly she broke out into a peal of laughter herself. "Drat his impudence!" she exclaimed, at last; "think of his coolly recommending me to turn 'sandwich!'"

"And he left no name?—no indication whereby to identify him" asked Donaldson

"No more than this. Although I was boiling over with wrath, I did keep my temper sufficiently to ask again what name I should say. 'Oh, tell Donaldson,' he said, 'the friend who got him out of a scrape by paying for his ticket from Croydon some two months ago, called to see him.'"

"Lightfoot, by the immortals!" exclaimed Jim. "But what induced you to give him lunch, Polly?"

"Well, he said you had asked him—that he knew no place about here to get anything to eat at, and that he was pressed for time. Truth it is," observed Miss Meggott, "I've played landlady to some of your friends before upon little better grounds."

"Doubtless! However, upon this occasion, Polly, my adored, you've been done brown as mushrooms. The gentleman who was so critical upon our resources, is of a kind who lives upon his fellow-creatures. He certainly does know me, but you needn't entertain him again."

Miss Meggott's eyes sparkled as she replied——

"I should like him to call just once more."

"Why?"

"That I might give him in charge for obtaining a mutton-chop under false pretences—and I'd do it, never fear." And Polly shook her head defiantly, as much as to say, "Who shall say me nay?"

Although Polly used much freedom in her converse with her masters, yet she was always extremely respectful to her master's guests. She was a young woman of great tact, and took a most sincere interest in the well-doing of both Donaldson and Collingham. She was almost as excited about their failures or successes as they could be themselves, and, whatsoever she might say on the subject, believed most implicitly that they were young men of extraordinary talents. Angry as she had been at the disparaging remarks of Mr. Lightfoot on their housekeeping, and flippant as she usually was with her tongue, still Miss Meggott had contrived to curb that unruly member on the occasion of the adventurer's visit, under the impression that he really was a friend of Jim Donaldson's. It had been a supreme effort,

and taxed Polly's patience to the utmost. Her wrath at finding that she had been tricked by a—shall we say, mildly, citizen of the world?—was naturally proportionate.

"Well," she exclaimed at last, "it seems Polly Meggott, who thought she knew London a little, wants a nurse about with her yet. Advertise, Mr. Donaldson, to-morrow for a companion to a lady of weak intellect; I've nothing to say against it. We must get somebody in to look after the three of us. But if ever I come across that Lightfoot again, if he don't get chops from the boot-maker's my name's not Polly Meggott!"

"Araminta, queen of my soul, and goddess of the grid-iron!" cried Collingham, "dry your tears, and remember that 'men are deceivers ever.' He might have stolen your heart, under pretext of merely wanting a chop. 'Tis well it's no worse."

"My heart, like newly-killed meat, takes a deal of cooking," replied Polly, laughing. "After the attacks that have been made upon it of late, there's not a pulsation left in it. Bless you! I can't marry you both, and could never make up my mind between you. I shall go and rehearse 'Dulcibella the Deceived' in the ashes of the back kitchen." And with a pleasant wink Miss Meggott left the room.

It was late in the evening when Collingham dropped in at "The Friars." There was a somewhat full meeting upon this occasion, and Mr. Blunderstone, who did "the mangling business" for the *Morning Misanthrope*, was laying down the law after his usual arbitrary fashion. A little, wizened old man, who looked as if he had been suckled upon nitric acid, and come into the world with a liver complaint, Mr. Blunderstone had essayed literature in various forms; he had written plays, which managers had rejected; he had given birth to novels, which publishers had declined; he had penned essays, which still remained in the privacy of his desk. As he had so far failed to construct, it was obvious that his mission was to pull down; so Mr. Blunderstone betook himself to reviewing, and Mr. Blunderstone had of late acquired some reputation for the pungency of his pen.

But Mr. Blunderstone, alas! as is sometimes the case with those who achieve notoriety, had a little lost his head in consequence of his success, and had latterly thought fit to set himself up as an authority on art and literature amongst the Friars. It was a dangerous weakness to give rein to. The brotherhood were cynical and unsparing of tongue as a rule. If you had made mistake with pen, brush, or pencil, you might rest assured that it had not escaped the ken of the wandering community. And yet Mr. Blunderstone, in his new-blown effulgence, had the rashness to think that the failures of his youth were beyond the memories of the brethren.

Woes me! but before that condonement of our indiscretions is arrived at, we must bury our co-mates and attain that approach to reckoning our years at a hundred, that must be saddest of doom meted out to man in this world. We all cling to life, but it must be fraught with melancholy to those who stand isolated ruins, while the grass grows green over all those who once laughed and wept with them. "Those whom the gods love die young," said the ancients. Can the converse thereof be equally true, that those whom they condemn, they leave to moulder here on earth in their decrepitude?

The Friars were immensely amused at, to speak figuratively, the new aspirant to Doctor Johnson's chair. The novices of the order especially delighted in drawing out the great Blunderstone upon all occasions, deferred to his opinion in manner positively sycophantic, and meekly murmured their new litany of "Be merciful in thy strength, O Blunderstone, lest no one dare put pen to paper in the land."

"While many a wicked smile they smole,
And many a wink they wunk."

Mr. Blunderstone, carried away by the immunity that he has so far experienced, is at present tearing to tatters, in high piping querulous tones, Donaldson's last comedy. "Deficient in plot, weak in dialogue, it cannot much longer impose upon the credulity of a London audience," he wound up with, as his voice reached well-nigh to a shriek

"Awfully jolly sad for you, when it goes out of the bills," observed Charlie quietly, as he lit a cigar.

"Why?" inquired Mr. Blunderstone sharply. Had he noticed the presence of Donaldson's most intimate friend, he would have been rather more guarded in his language.

"Because his next piece is to succeed that, and he's got you in it. You're rather well done, Blunderstone. Jim took a good deal of pains to hit you off correctly. As he said, you're a man of mark now, and the public ought to be introduced to you."

"The man, sir, who would make literary capital of his associates, deserves the execration of the civilised world," retorted Blunderstone.

"Just what Jim said when he read that personal attack in the *Mohawk*," rejoined Charlie phlegmatically, with the quiet addendum that he'd try to promote that laudable sentiment.

"And who presumed to insinuate that I wrote that?"

"Bless you, I don't know. I always said it was too clever to be of your penning, but Jim thinks otherwise, and declares that such insolence and invective could have been written by no one else."

"Mr. Donaldson will do well to think twice before he provokes the enmity of the press," piped Blunderstone. "He'd better bear in mind that those who made him can unmake him."

"Quite agree with you," retorted his tormentor; "but there's no arguing with Jim, he only laughs and says you are not the press by a good many chalks, and that nobody pays much attention to your criticism."

"He shall see, sir—he shall see!" spluttered the reviewer.

"Reckon, Blunderstone, you've slipped the whip-cord into the wrong nigger," remarked Mr. Slymme, with a broad grin. "You'd better hold on to crucifying the small fry, who can't yelp back. It makes things unpleasant when they don't lie down to the lash, don't it?"

"Hush, Slymme, don't talk blasphemy," interrupted Fred Nightingale, of the comic papers, and light literature generally. "When the gods inspired Blunderstone to give up afflicting the managers with incomprehensible

pieces, they bestowed upon him the gift of judging of other people's works. Like Diogenes, he passes his life in seeking for something that he may praise. Like the Greek cynic, he fails in his search."

The bantered reviewer bestowed a malignant glance upon the speaker, as he exclaimed, in the half-scream that became natural to him when excited,

"I deny the article in the *Mohawk*."

"Daresay Jim will deny that Dr. Grindstone is meant for you in his new piece," observed Charlie, meditatively; "but self-denial is one of the virtues, we all know."

"What's the use of riling up, Blunderstone?—if you splash the mud about, it's likely some will come your own way. You don't suppose you've got a monopoly of the cow-hide, do you?" remarked Mr. Slymme. "Guess you'd better take a hint from our citizens. When anyone gives you fits, just look reound and see who's handiest to pass it on tew. Pay out the stripes, and make 'em sharp in the same proportion that you were hurt."

"I am not in the habit of *riling up*, as you call it," returned Mr. Blunderstone, with a countenance highly contradictory of that statement, "and have the honour to wish you good night."

"Quite right, sir—quite right," retorted the unabashed American. "Take it out of some one before you sleep. If you let off about a couple of columns of bile before you turn in, you'll wake crisp and chipper to-morrow."

Mr. Blunderstone vouchsafed no response, but left the room enveloped in the shreds of his outraged dignity.

"He'd have made a tall slave-owner," observed Mr. Slymme, musingly. "He'd have seen justice dealt out on a plantation, he would! He'd have been the boy to mind the niggers didn't get fat and sassy! He's born to ride over people as have had their teeth drawn and their claws filed, but he'd cut up skeary down West."

"I suppose that's all a flam about Dr. Grindstone?" observed Fred Nightingale.

"Yes; I only wanted to take old Blunderstone down a peg or two. He's an arrant bully, and was running riot with regard to Donaldson's comedy. I knew if I

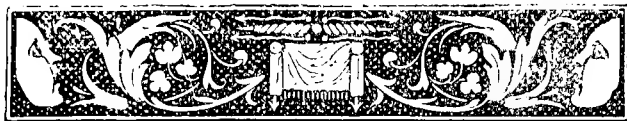
suggested Jim might retaliate, he would speedily subside. What's the best news with you?"

"None to tell, Charlie. 'A day of doleful dumps' it's been with me. Stay! I picked up a good thing for the paper this morning—make a neat sketch, I think. I was passing down Duke Street, St. James's, when, on the opposite side of the way, I espied a chimney-sweep clothed in all his sooty panoply. A hansom cabman, wearing a white hat, and driving a horse pale as that of Death in the Revelation, was walking his vehicle up the street. His eye twinkled as he saw the chummy, and, touching his hat, he cried out, 'Cab, sir?' The chimney-sweep stopped, regarded him critically for a second or two, and then replied—'Werry neat turn out, from the top of yer tile to the 'oofs of yer 'oos, but—' and here he paused—'yer the *wrong colour!*'"

"Smart!" said Mr. Slymme. "That flue-scourer could run alone, bet your pile."

"Well, it's time to be off," said Charlie. "Good night." And, nodding to Slymme and Nightingale Mr. Collingham betook himself homeward.





CHAPTER XIX.

RETALIATION.

MR. HOLBOURNE carries his head higher, and flourishes the gold eye-glass more ostentatiously than ever. An accession of importance accrues to him from the fact that he has declined the honour of an alliance with a Collingham of Churton, and that Collingham, moreover, the heir to the estate and title. He expands under the genial influence, and becomes more benevolent and patronising of manner to Aldringham than before, if that be possible. True, he reflects ruefully that it is not etiquette to blazon such rejections to the world, and that if Grace had but been a sensible girl, he might have been openly exulting over the forthcoming connection instead of having to swell silently with pride that his daughter had gainsaid the young heir of Churton. But Aldringham is keen of nose, quick of ear, and avid of tongue when scandal or gossip is afoot, and the banker soon finds much solace to his vanity in parrying the attacks, congratulations, or interrogatives that are showered upon him. Aldringham had little doubt that Mr. Collingham's love had arrived at that stage when men demand decisive answer to their wooing.

Aldringham was anxious to hear its acuteness confirmed from Mr. Holbourne's own lips. From the deprecatory disavowals, the tattling little town had no diffi-

culty in assuring itself that the young squire had wooed her in vain. But which of the ladies was it that had said him nay? Marion, already sore-wounded in her vanity, was destined to have that gall kept alive for some time, thanks to the keen cross-examination of her dear friends. Harder still to brook for one of her temperament, when, in answer to such keen questioning, she was fain to admit that Mr. Collingham had never solicited her hand, were such remarks as, "Good gracious! Miss Langworthy, and we all deemed you the object of attraction; but there's no accounting for men."

In the family circle, Marion maintained her usually suave demeanour, and albeit she felt an almost uncontrollable desire to bite her "dear Grace" at times instead of kissing her, she allowed no sign of this to be manifest in her conduct towards her cousin. Indeed, at this time she made her uncle and Grace exceedingly uncomfortable from the ostentatious deference with which she consulted their approval upon all household arrangements.

"Pooh, nonsense—of course, child! Why do you pester me about it?" would the banker reply, uneasily, upon being appealed to on some minor point of domestic polity, which Miss Langworthy had been wont to decide off-hand.

"It is different now, uncle, that Grace has grown up. I am bound to think of how she may regard such things," would be Marion's soft rejoinder. "It is not your approval only I have now to look to."

Mr. Holbourne pished and pshawed, but became dimly conscious that his establishment was not working so smoothly as heretofore; while slowly was incubated the idea that it was his daughter's jealous temperament and petty desire to hold the reins of government that were the cause of all this unpleasantness. Gradually, too, Marion insinuated into his mind a sense of injury inflicted upon him by Grace's refusal of Robert Collingham's suit. She painted in glowing colours the accession of dignity and importance that would have attached itself to him as father-in-law to the heir of Churton, until slowly the banker began to regard his bonny Grace as a very Regan or Goneril.

Grace, meanwhile, opened wide her brown eyes at her cousin's new-born meekness. With unfeigned surprise she listened to Marion's constant appeals as to whether this, that, and the other would suit her convenience. With regard to the carriage, Miss Langworthy waxed perfectly apologetic, although she used it quite as much as formerly for her own purposes; but she made much parade now of "If dear Grace was quite certain she would not want it," before she ordered it.

If Marion showed no outward sign, inwardly she was consumed with rage. All the malice of her nature—no inconsiderable quantity—had been aroused by her failure to win Robert Collingham, and she chose to regard Grace as the cause of that disappointment. She furiously resented, too, Reginald's defalcation, and, interpreting Mr. Lightfoot's epistle by her own lights, she at once put down Lettice as his *chère amie*. She vowed vengeance on both brother and sister. As regarded her offending lover, she saw her way, but as to wreaking her spite upon Grace she was not as yet quite so clear. Still Miss Langworthy thought of late she had detected undue signs of interest in her cousin when Charlie Collingham's name was mentioned. She was not certain; but only let her find such a point of weakness in Grace's armour, and she should know where to strike. Then Marion reflected about Charlie Collingham's appearance at the ball, her cousin's admission that she had known him the season before in London: and the more she thought over it, the more convinced became Miss Langworthy that there were love-passages between Grace and that discarded son of Sir John's.

This idea once installed in Marion's brain, she prosecuted her search for corroboration thereof with all the subtleness and energy of a skilled detective. She was down by times of a morning to scrutinize her cousin's correspondence, and was rewarded by the occasional advent of a letter in masculine hand, bearing the London postmark. Still she was a stranger to Charlie's handwriting, and, whatever she might think, she required proof positive on this subject. She determined to consult the astute Lightfoot in the matter.

It may be remembered that the last chapter contained the record of an eccentric raid made by that distinguished personage on the small house at Brompton—object apparently no other than a mutton-chop. Mr. Lightfoot's real business was to procure a specimen of Charlie Collingham's handwriting. His disparaging remarks on his entertainment were all matters of calculation, and when, pronouncing the sherry undrinkable, he requested Miss Meggott to fetch him a pint of half-and-half, he thereby secured a few minutes to himself in the apartment. Both desks were strewn with manuscript—notes of articles, ideas for scenes, &c., lay scattered about, and to a man of Lightfoot's experience it took little time to select an unimportant scrap of handwriting from each desk of the predominant penmanship thereon. He did not know which was which, it was true, but his client could easily ascertain if either of those would serve her turn.

These two scraps of paper were duly forwarded to Marion, with the remark that one was Mr. Collingham's, one Mr. Donaldson's, and that she would be perfectly justified in concluding that to be Mr. Collingham's in which, on comparison, she found a resemblance to any writing she should suspect to be his. Miss Langworthy had no longer any doubt as to who was her cousin's London correspondent.

Simultaneously with this acquired knowledge on Marion's part arose once more the rumour in Aldringham that the cause of quarrel between Sir John and his son had been the disgraceful marriage of the latter; that Charlie was wedded to a lady of fame beyond suspicion, in the most malignant sense of the phrase. Who she was, gossip as yet forbore to state, but the story trickled from house to house, and gathered strength as it spread.

It was not long before the scandal reached Grace's ear, and the girl's face flushed, and she bit her lips as she mutely confronted it. She scorned to give credence to such vulgar report. Was not Charlie her own betrothed, and did she not trust him thoroughly? But for all that, Grace could not forget that her *fiancé* had owned to her

that there was a Blue Beard's chamber in his past life, and that it was connected with his rupture with his father. Grace bore herself gallantly, and she had need, for though she knew it not, she was undergoing vivisection at the hands of a clever woman who hated her.

Day by day Marion watched her cousin wince under the last garbled version of the popular rumour that she detailed to her, in pursuance of her own schemes of vengeance. Day by day she smiled softly as she perceived that the rift between the banker and his daughter was surely though imperceptibly widening. Miss Langworthy's exceeding deference to Grace or her uncle's wishes at this time covered them both with confusion, and yet it invariably seemed that what she did to pleasure the one, produced corresponding discomfort to the other. This, of course, told most upon Mr. Holbourne, whose pet comforts and hobbies were apparently always set aside for the gratification of his daughter.

The banker fidgeted and got irritable under these circumstances. Pompous and grandiloquent he had ever been to his family, but a more kind and indulgent father it would have been hard to come across. Now, Mr. Holbourne began mentally to credit his daughter with much selfishness of disposition. He leant more and more upon Marion, and deemed her failures in the furtherance of his comforts were due solely to Grace's perverseness.

Grace was not altogether blind to all this—she saw clearly that there was an adverse influence dominating over her home, that nothing she could do seemed now right in her father's eyes. Her woman's tact told her but too assuredly that Marion was at the bottom of all this mischief; but indignant as she was at the misconception put upon her every word and action, she felt that she was powerless to stem the tide. She was struggling, poor girl, against the machinations of a clever, unscrupulous woman, who had divined her secret, and who indirectly at times gave her reason to suppose so. It was as difficult to lay hold of anything tangible regarding Marion as to handle an eel. She slipped through the fingers, to speak metaphorically, much after the manner

of that astute semi-reptile, and often as Grace had vowed to ascertain from her lips whether she did know of her engagement to Charlie Collingham, yet Marion had always cleverly evaded such questioning.

Grace grows very sad under all this—her letters to her over bear a tinge of melancholy, and she cannot refrain from alluding to the Aldringham rumour. She takes out his letter received that morning, and runs over it for the sixth or seventh time.

“Can’t you trust me yet a little, darling?” it ran.

Believe me, I can most effectually silence all those Aldringham idiots when the time comes. That I have reasons strong for still keeping the key of my one secret chamber, is it not palpable? Or else, Grace, would you not have been possessed of it long since? You cannot doubt me—if you do, you must have ceased to love me. I have but this one reservation from you. I ask you to bear with it but a little longer, and promise that you shall know the whole front of my offending before I claim the biggest prize this world can offer me—yourself. Will not that suffice? You’d scarce wish to humiliate me, but bitter scorn might prove my father’s benediction on our bridal now; curt rejection be probably your father’s answer, if I asked him for you as things are at present. Trust me, Grace, a few months more, and no one but yourself shall gainsay me your hand. Ever your own

“CHARLIE COLLINGHAM.”

This might have been denominated “the nagging period” of Grace’s life. To be nagged at by one’s fellow-creatures is well-nigh the supreme torture of civilized life; but to be nagged at by circumstances also is to reach the nethermost hell. When you can do nothing right, say nothing right, think nothing right, or even, God help you, dream nothing right, one is apt to wonder why men hold this a fair world, and are loth to leave it. But so it is. The ills we know seem better to face than an unknown future. When an *artiste* of Miss Langworthy’s calibre pulls the domestic strings of your establishment, and feels herself aggrieved in any shape, it is extraordinary the discord that becomes prevalent through the household. But when she holds a member thereof guilty

of dire offending, it is incredible how circumstances appear to mete out punishment to the delinquent. When the culprit happens to be a daughter (therefore tied to the stake), who has refused an eligible offer, the denizens of Pompeii, at the time of the eruption of the burning mountain, were comparatively in easy circumstances. Their troubles were soon over, but your domestic volcano will vomit smoke and trickle lava for many a month to come. Though the smoke may not choke, nor the lava kill, they leave much singing in the head and blistering of the mind behind them. I know two or three moral volcanoes that are always in full blast. I shirk them cleverly, for the most part; but there are times when escape proves impossible, and I sit and suffer while the hot ashes permeate my shirt, trickle into my boots, and scorch me into recognition of my manifold delinquencies.

The only happy days Grace had at this time were those which, having escaped to Churton, she passed with Sylla Collingham. The blind girl had got over that temporary pang of jealousy with which she had been first stricken, upon learning that she was no longer to hold first place in the heart of that dearly-loved brother of hers, and now welcomed Grace most cordially as a sister.

Miss Holbourne had driven over to Churton one blazing Summer day, to bid Sylla good-bye, her father having resolved to transport himself and his belongings to London for three weeks or so—the usual country cousins' holiday. Miss Collingham is at home, and she is not—that is to say, she is somewhere in the grounds. Will Miss Holbourne sit down while Thomas goes to find her? asks the portly butler. No, Miss Holbourne will conduct the search herself; and having ordered the horses to be put up, Grace stepped into the garden. Two or three turns told her that Sylla was not there. She scans the Park narrowly, but fails to catch sight of skirt or petticoat that might betoken Miss Collingham; and then Grace determines to walk up to The Hazels. As she ascends the little knoll, Dandy makes his appearance upon the summit, gives her a rough bark of welcome, and then bounds down to meet her.

"Ha, Dandy, man, I thought I should find you and your mistress here!" cried Grace, as she caressed the collie. "Run on, boy, and tell her who it is that's coming."

The dog jumped round her for a minute or so, and then sped like an arrow on his mission. As Grace gained the crest of the eminence, she saw Sylla seated on the turf, her head thrown slightly forward to catch the coming step of her visitor.

"It is you, Gracie, is it not?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Miss Holbourne, as she bent over her and kissed her. "Come to bid you farewell for a little, and to pour some of my troubles into your ear as I do so."

"Farewell!—troubles!—what do you mean?"

"Nothing to frighten you, Sylla," replied Grace, as she seated herself. "First, papa is going to take us to London; secondly, I am very unhappy."

"Going to London and unhappy, Gracie! Why, you will see Charlie!"

"Good heavens, Sylla! don't I tell you I am going with papa, and not to stay with my aunt?"

"It don't much matter," returned Miss Collingham, smiling, "whom you are with in London! you will see Charlie all the same, unless you have kept him in ignorance of the fact."

"No, I think he knows all about it," replied Grace, in a low voice.

"I can't perceive your troubles so far, my dear."

"No, and I can hardly make you comprehend them. How shall I make you understand that I have an uncomfortable home? The daughter of the well-to-do banker, with everything she can ask for, should be happy; and yet, Sylla, I could cry my eyes out with vexation six days out of seven."

"Gracie, I don't understand you."

"No, and I don't know how to explain matters. Can you imagine everything you do, everything you say, misconstrued—your slightest word distorted to your disadvantage—your very looks misinterpreted? Can you picture the admission you have a headache made ground

for putting the house into mourning? Can you fancy my father's whims systematically interfered with, on the plea that they annoy 'dear Gracie,' who would cut her little finger off sooner than object to them? I," continued the girl, passionately, "who never knew what it was to have a cross word from my father, am now the target for what bitter remarks he may have in him!"

"But how comes all this, Gracie? Who can have come between you and your father?"

"Marion, of course. I am helpless, I could not allege a single thing against her; but I feel nevertheless that 'tis she makes all this mischief. She used to snub me, bully me, and laugh when I rose in rebellion. At present she affects to consult me in everything, she yields to me in everything, and I never had less my own way than now. She garbles my own speeches, till I doubt whether I can express myself clearly on any point."

"But surely if you pointed out frankly to your father that your wishes or observations had been misunderstood——"

"You don't know Marion," interrupted Grace; "I can't fathom her myself, and Regi, poor boy, although he's engaged to her, knows her still less; as for my father, she can twist him round her little finger, and make him believe anything she chooses in the course of a few days."

"I don't know how to advise you, Gracie. If I could but see for myself," said Miss Collingham mournfully.

"Hush, Sylla dearest," whispered Grace, as she passed her arm round her friend. "I feel ashamed of myself when I think of what my trials are when compared with your affliction; and do not I hope that some day soon Charlie will take me away from them all? But the Aldringham people worry me cruelly about him. They have revived the old story of his marriage, and though I know it false, the rumour frets me horribly all the same."

"Gracie, child, my brother's all too good for you. Can't you trust him?"

"Yes, and I do implicitly; but, Sylla, when your whole world seems out of gear, it comes hard to have it

constantly impressed upon you that your lover is married besides."

A faint smile flickered over Sylla's face as she replied, "O Fatima, don't hope to gloss over your curiosity, you are wild to have possession of the key of my Blue Beard brother's closet. You had better have taken Robert, about whom no mystery exists."

"If you ever say that again, I will never set foot in Churton more!" replied Grace sharply.

"Don't be angry, sister *mia*, but let's go home and have some tea. Oh, you forgive then, you hot-tempered Gracie," said Sylla, as her companion drew her arm within her own. "I half thought I should have to trust to Dandy to take me back. Where are you, my dog? You believed in your master, didn't you?" she continued, as Dandy thrust his black muzzle into her hand. "Tell her, Dandy, it's a crying shame to doubt him, and that you and I say so."

"I don't Sylla, I don't—you know it; but to be constantly told that your affianced lover is already married, does grate upon the ear all the same."

Faith is a great virtue, and heaven help man or woman who, despite the decay of youth's bright illusions, does not succeed in keeping some modicum of belief in his fellow-creatures, to travel through the world with. But, as Miss Holbourne remarks, to be continually told that your plighted love is already married, is a strain on such faith scarce warranted in these times.





CHAPTER XX.

DEATH OF GRANDPAPA CHESLETT.



ONLY four days since that walk in the Zoological Gardens, and Lettice is busy at early morning making coffee for her departing lover. She had made him promise over night that he would run in, wish her good-bye, and take the grace cup and god-speed from her own fair hands. She feels rather sad at parting with him, but it is not for long. She knows it is for his own good—indeed, he insists upon it for hers—and then he has promised to write. There is magical consolation to the girl in that last fact. Lettice has never known what it is to receive letters of any kind, and now she is about to entertain love-letters. She may well dream of sunshine even in her lover's absence. Does sweeter reading ever meet us than those silly, ungrammatical notes that come to us during the flood-tide of our first passion? The balcony scene in "Romeo and Juliet" is as thrilling love poetry as ever was written, but it will never stir the pulses as did those foolish little notes that reached us from our heart's first queen.

She flits about the room, a little nervous and anxious. She pushes back the dark masses of hair from her temples, and once more raises the lid of the coffee-pot. She looks pale this morning: as when she sits up all night to broider a cigar case for her lover will be the lot

of maiden; and Lettice could not let him go without something to remind him of her. Ever and anon she glances at the third finger of her left hand, on which sparkles a handsome emerald, a recent and dazzling addition to Miss Cheslett's most modest stock of jewelry. The cab is at the door, and Sarah comes tumbling down the stairs with the traveller's baggage. A sharp tap at the door, and Reginald enters.

"Quick with my coffee, pet, for I have but a few minutes to spare."

"It is all ready," replied the girl, as she lifted it from the fender and commenced to pour it out.

"Halloa! what's this?" he exclaimed, as he raised the cigar-case from the table. "Is this for me?"

"Yes, Reginald. I sat up all night to get it finished. I did so want you to have something to remind you of me while you should be away."

He turned the case over in his fingers. It was of velvet; on the one side was embroidered his initials; on the other, in gold, Lettice.

"You think I want something to remind me of you," he said at length, and as he spoke he tumbled over her work-basket carelessly. "Good! Come here." He took her in his arms and kissed her, and as he did so there came a slight click, and one of Lettice's ebon tresses fell upon the carpet. He picked it up and placed it in the cigar-case. "There," he said in a low voice, "I shall contrive to recollect you now."

She smiled up in his face, and said timidly,

"I might have thought of that, but I did not know you would care to have it. You will write often, won't you? It will be so new to me to get letters—so sweet to get them from you."

"Yes, Lettice. And now good-bye, my own; I must linger no longer."

He clasped her again to his breast, once more their lips met in a long, loving kiss, and then Reginald dashed from the room, and threw himself into his cab.

She watched from the open window till the vehicle was out of sight, gazed dreamily after it long after it was beyond her ken, and then, with a long-drawn breath,

Lettice sat down and was lost in a delicious love-dream.

"How nice it was of him to steal my hair from me," she mused; "and how delightful it will be to get his letters! I never noticed the postman's rap before, but now my heart will flutter with every stroke of the knocker!" And then she fell to calculating what was the earliest date she might expect to hear from him.

Reginald, meanwhile, as he sped on his way to Charing Cross, was also immersed in reflection. He was honestly and deeply in love, and the roseate hues of that leave-taking still hovered around him. But mingled with such thoughts was a sense of relief that he should escape confronting his own people in town. A letter from Marion had informed him that they would be in London in a few days, and situated as he now was, he shrank from the idea of meeting Miss Langworthy. After the fashion of men, he was glad of an excuse to put off the inevitable explanation that must take place with her. The procrastination of unpleasant subjects is an infirmity of most of us. A friend of mine, much given to such treatment of the "disagreeables," justifies his conduct in this wise, "Time enough to face such things when you needs must. Never be in a hurry, for there's no saying what the railways or street-crossings may do for you!"

Of course I do not mean that speculation as to his cousin's death ever for one second crossed Reginald's brain; but he did hope vaguely that something might turn up to render that explanation more easy than it seemed at present. As it was, the more he thought of it the less he liked it, to use a homely phrase much in vogue in the hunting-field. And even as those who contemplate the awkward fence over-long seldom think it practicable, so Reginald deemed his "obstacle" the bigger the more he dwelt upon it.

Days slip away. Lettice, I am afraid, dedicates much time to voluminous letter-writing, and on the fourth day from Reginald's departure a foreign-stamped missive arrives for Miss Cheslett. The blood rushes into the girl's face as she clutches her treasure. "Odd," she murmurs, as she reads the superscription. "I never

thought to tell him my name. I know the people in the house always call me Miss Cheslett, and he always called me Lettice. It is funny," she continued, laughing, "but Reginald doesn't even as yet know his betrothed wife's name. Well, I don't think I shall tell him now till he comes back. I will keep that as a joke against him."

It was not a very long epistle, but Lettice was delighted with it, and quite sure that such a love-letter never was penned. She read and re-read it, and referred to it at all times and seasons, as if it contained a code for her guidance through life. I know her conduct is preposterous. Conceiving such love as this, for a young man with Reginald's shadowy prospects, is an iniquity that passes belief in these times. Still, bear in mind she is but a child, and a nobody to boot, and knows naught about the conventionalities or the ways of those that sit in high places. She loves because she cannot help it, and has given no more thought about how she and Reginald are to live than if she were a young sparrow. The man that could pen a wise love-letter would most assuredly be very little in love. Reginald's was not particularly remarkable for foolishness, and it contained what, after all, is the gist of such letters—plenty of good, honest affection and sweet words. When they have that within them, I fancy a maiden reck's little if they want wisdom, and would be blind to much want of understanding. Any way, Reginald's note seemed to satisfy Lettice—she danced about the house and chirruped like a bird. Her black eyes sparkled, and a smile played ever on her lips, till even Sarah, stolidest of housemaids, wondered "whatever had come over Miss Lettice." She laughed at her grandfather's querulous complaints, till even he gazed in amazement at the child, and wrathfully inquired "what she saw to be so pleased about?" And Lettice only laughed the merrier, and said there was no law that she should not be happy.

Bright and brisk Lettice emerges from her own little nest some few days later, and trips into the sitting-room. It is a glorious Summer morning, and the soft air comes in through the open window, and kisses her cheek

lovingly. Quite possible, she thinks, that the tardy postman may have something for her when he does come. At last that functionary makes his appearance, and he *has* a letter for Miss Cheslett. The girl's eyes flash, and a low laugh trills from her lips as she opens her second love-letter. She reads it through thrice, and then sits, lost in thought, gazing into vacancy, apparently—gazing in reality across the bright blue tumbling waters, even unto Frankfort and the gardens of Sachsenhausen. Wrapped in her reverie, she takes but little heed of time, till the chiming of the pendule on the mantelpiece recalls her to herself.

"Ten o'clock!" she exclaims, "and no tea made! I shall have grandfather down directly, and then, woe's me! I shall have a lecture on my laziness." And Lettice bustled about, rang the bell, and made divers preparations for breakfast.

Mr. Cheslett was an habitually unpunctal man, so his granddaughter took but little heed of his non-appearance at first. But when the timepiece rang out eleven, Lettice thought it behoved her to see after him. She drummed accordingly upon his door, which opened into the sitting-room, with her fingers, but elicited no response. She then called him by name—still no answer came to her from within. The girl's heart began to beat, and she softly turned the door-handle and looked in. The curtains were still drawn, and she could barely distinguish one thing from another, coming as she did out of the bright sunshine; but already a chill ran through her veins, and she became dimly conscious that she was *alone* in that room. She rushed across, tore back the curtains, and as the light poured into the room, she crept silently to the bed-side. Pale, calm, and still, her grandfather's face lay turned towards her, and his eyes confronted hers with the stern fixity of death. She snatched the hand which lay listless on the coverlet, and pressed it to her lips, and as the chillness of the dead overcame the warm blood of the living, Lettice uttered a faint cry, sank down by the bedside, and knew that her grandfather's spirit had sped.

She had slight consciousness of how long she remained

there ; it was in reality but a few minutes, yet to Lettice it had seemed a considerable time. She rose from her knees with a glimmering idea that she stood all alone in the world, with no soul to advise or assist her, save one, and that he was far away. She rang the bell, and with streaming eyes bid Sarah run for the doctor—that her grandfather was dying. She knew well that he was dead, but she still scarce liked to admit that it was so, even to herself. She went back into the room, kissed the cold, still face once more, and sat down by the bedside till the doctor should come. She thought over her young life, recalled to her mind that dead sister who a few years back used to come home tired, but radiant with delight, from the theatre where she earned her bread, and pour forth stories that seemed of Fairyland into her childish ears ; then she recollected how that gay, joyous lover of the dead girl's had appeared upon the scene—what mirth and laughter there would be in the little sitting-room of their then habitation when he dropped in, and how they had both petted her ! Then she conjured up their wedding-day, and how Lilian promised her that she should come and live with them. Ah ! well, she saw little of Lilian after that. And then she thought how her brother-in-law had appeared one day clothed in deepest mourning, and in a voice choked with sobs had announced to her grandfather that Lilian was dead. How she cried ! She remembered how her brother-in-law took her in his arms, and while the tears stood in his own eyes, told her they must hope poor Lilian had gone to a happier and better world. How well she recollected his last words ! “ Lettice, child,” he whispered, “ we have lost her—the sunlight is all gone from my life, and if I don't work, I shall go mad ; but I am your brother, bear in mind, and for my poor wife's sake, let alone your own, shall be ever one to you. Write to me now and then, little one, and tell me about yourself.” But her grandfather immediately changed his abode, and as she did not know where her brother-in-law lived, she had never been able to write to him. Where was he now ? she wondered.

Here the doctor made his appearance. A glance suf

ficed almost to tell him that the old man was dead—had been dead indeed, for some hours. He gently closed the staring eyes, and broke the fact to the girl, but she answered—

"I knew it when I sent for you, but was loth to give up all hope."

"You had best come away now," he replied, and Lettice suffered him to lead her back to the sitting-room.

"Sad thing," he said to the landlady, before he took his departure. "She seems all alone in the world. You ought to get her out of these rooms, if you can, till after the funeral. I can certify to death from heart-disease, so that I don't think you will be troubled with an inquest."

"Poor child! yes," replied the landlady; "and as luck will have it, I've a lodger, a great friend of theirs, who's gone abroad for a little; she can have his rooms, and welcome,"

So, a little later, the landlady suggested to Lettice that she should occupy Reginald's rooms until after the funeral. A faint smile flickered on the girl's lips as she assented. Yes, she should like that. There was nought left her in the world now but his love. It would be sweet to live where he had lived, to sleep where he had slept, and brood over his letters. To Lettice's romantic mind, few suggestions could have proved more acceptable, and that evening saw her installed in Reginald's rooms.





CHAPTER XXI.

MARION'S COMMISSION.



ABOUT ten days after Reginald Holbourne sped on his way to Frankfort, his father, sister, and cousin had established themselves in a comfortable first-floor in Sackville Street. None of the party, to say the truth, were very conversant in the ways of the metropolis. Of course Mr. Holbourne had often been there, but never very long at a time. His lines had been cast in provincial waters, and he understood little of the big, seething London cauldron. Miss Langworthy, too, had slight experience of town; and so it was, thanks to a six weeks' sojourn with her aunt, Mrs. Wilkinson, the previous year, that the ways of the big city were more understood by Grace than by either of her companions.

Marion felt that she had much delicate business to transact during her visit. It was necessary, in the first place, that she should see her mysterious agent, on whom, to her knowledge, she had as yet never set eyes. She had an extremely confidential mission to entrust to him; and further, Miss Langworthy considered that, as he evidently had a perfect knowledge of her appearance, it would be as well that she should be able to identify him. Marion would have preferred that he should never have seen her, but, as he undoubtedly had, it was useless

o scruple further about an interview. She was well satisfied with him so far. True, he demanded large payment for his services, but what information she had required of him had been obtained promptly. He troubled her with no details as to how it was acquired, but forwarded it curtly and swiftly, and she had no reason to doubt its accuracy. At all events, she meant to test some of it during her stay in town.

Gracie, too, had a little conspiracy of her own; but, as it amounted to no more than persuading her aunt to arrange a meeting for herself and Charlie, it can hardly be deemed anything but a plot of the most commonplace description, and yet Gracie puzzled her pretty head over it a great deal. You see, she did not quite wish to inform Mrs. Wilkinson of her engagement, and yet her request was not so easy to urge, unless she did so. What thought and scheming these love-affairs cost, to bring them to a satisfactory conclusion! That we have either not time or not talent to conduct such purposes to a prosperous issue, is the reason, perhaps, that so many of us are doomed to remain unwedded.

Miss Langworthy was, by this time, of course, possessed of Mr. Lightfoot's address at Islington; so, the second morning after her arrival in town, she despatched a note, saying that she wished to see him—that her own knowledge of London was somewhat limited, and that she left it to him to suggest where she could meet him with least inconvenience and chance of observation.

Mr. Lightfoot replied, with much promptitude, "that he should do himself the honour to attend Miss Langworthy's commands upon any day she might think fit to name; that if he might presume to advise, the fountains in Kensington Gardens afforded a rendezvous not much frequented in the morning by the fashionable world; that, if Miss Langworthy would be there at any time she might think fit to name, take a moderately conspicuous seat, and do him the favour to keep her veil up and remain stationary, he had not the slightest doubt about finding her. "But," said Mr. Lightfoot, in conclusion, "wherever you may think proper to seat yourself, do me the favour not to move, as my experience teaches

me that, though it is very easy anywhere for one person to find another, yet, if two people mutually set about such discovery, they seldom meet."

It having been settled one afternoon that they should devote the next day to "doing the Royal Academy." Miss Langworthy wrote a line to say that she would be at the fountains at half-past twelve, and pleaded at breakfast a severe headache as excuse for breaking the engagement. Mr. Holbourne and his daughter accordingly started without her. No sooner were they well off than Marion set out to keep her assignation.

She took a chair on arriving there, and in less than ten minutes a quietly-dressed man raised his hat to her, and announced himself as Mr. Lightfoot.

"Take a seat, please," said Marion, "as our conversation may last some little time. Now," she continued, as the adventurer placed himself beside her, "as far as my commissions have extended, I have been satisfied. You charge high, Mr. Lightfoot, for your information; but it is certainly prompt, and I believe accurate."

"Secret intelligence, Miss Langworthy, is mostly expensive. If you have made no mistake about the details of the inquiries you have entrusted me to make, I pledge myself to the accuracy of the information I have forwarded to you."

"Some of it, sir, may be probably tested shortly, although I have no cause to doubt that it is true enough, But I have a more elaborate mission for you just now. You know Mr. Charles Collingham?"

"Certainly."

"You know where he lives, what his pursuits are, who are his friends?" said Marion.

"Pretty well, but could know the latter much more fully in a little time."

"You know his wife by sight, probably."

"Assuredly not, and am unaware at present that he is married."

"I have reason to believe that he is," replied Marion, sharply, "and the discovery of that marriage is the commission I now give you."

"It shall be investigated at once, but any hints you

may be able to afford me to start on will, of course, make matters easier. He most certainly does not live with his wife at present. Though I never heard he had one, it is quite possible. I do not know very much about him—should, indeed, not even be aware of the fact that they don't live together, had you not commissioned me to obtain a specimen of his handwriting."

"Let me think a few moments!" exclaimed Marion, "while I place together the scraps I know about the affair. They don't amount to much, but may afford you some clue."

For a few moments Miss Langworthy was silent, and then continued—

"He quarrelled with his father, Sir John, some five years ago—he would be just leaving Oxford then—supposed reason that he married a woman of bad character, in spite of Sir John's remonstrances; and though nothing is known for certain, he is assumed to have lived in London ever since."

"Thanks, Miss Langworthy; that gives me much to go on at once. I know now somewhere about the date of the presumed marriage, and that it was probably contracted in the vicinity of Oxford, or took place in London. Mere presumption, of course, but fair presumption all the same. Something to work upon."

"How long will it be before you can furnish the information I require?" asked Marion.

"Impossible to say. You see this is a much more complicated business than your former commissions, Miss Langworthy. To begin with, it is not even certain that there was a marriage," and Mr. Lightfoot regarded his companion with some curiosity.

"No, but my woman's instinct tells me there was."

"Very likely, but with every deference for your judgment, it is still but pure conjecture on your part, if I understand you rightly."

Marion bowed her head.

"To do anything in this business," resumed Lightfoot, "I must have money. I don't wish to discourage you, Miss Langworthy, but unless you put that pretty freely at my command, I tell you frankly there is little chance of my being able to assist you."

"I came prepared for that; there is twenty pounds to start with, and I will send you some more shortly. I think that is all I have to say at present—anything you have to communicate you had better address to Aldringham," with which Marion rose, bent her head slightly, and walked slowly away in the direction of the Park.

Lightfoot followed her with his eyes for a little, and then fondly regarded the two ten-pound notes she had placed in his hands.

"In a second back parlour in Chancery Lane
Lived a knowing old file who did always maintain."

hummed that citizen of the world airily. "It is a start, it is, this," he muttered, pausing in his minstrelsie. Now what the deuce is this girl driving at? *Imprimis*, ascertain all about Miss Cheslett. Motive simple there—something between her and her cousin most likely, and an attack of jealousy supervened. But what can she want with Collingham's writing, and what is it to her whether he's married or not? I must know this. When I exercise my talents for investigation, although of course the assuaging of a fellow-creature's curiosity is the first motive—bless 'em, they're always wanting to know," muttered Mr. Lightfoot parenthetically—"yet I look not only to pocketing the flimsies generally, but to the acquisition of a slight hold upon my employer. To speak metaphorically, it is essential that a contemptible weakness for prying into his neighbour's affairs should knot a silken rope round his own neck, the holding of which shall conduce to my future benefit. Miss Langworthy, I regret it, but it is all in the way of business. I must have your delicate neck within the noose. Niece of a prosperous banker, the very stones would cry shame upon me should I let you escape with the hook so deep set in your gills. It's a curious world—very," mused Mr. Lightfoot, addressing his remarks to the nursemaids and fountains generally.

"Here's a young woman of good position, to gratify her malice, spleen, or jealousy, putting herself in the hands of a man of whom she knows nothing. The public would look upon this as a singular case. The public!" continued Mr. Lightfoot, contemptuously, "upon my word I doubt if it is possible to conceive the extent of

the gullibility of the public. Although the newspapers contain records of such imprudent faith in the plausible stranger, and what comes of it about three times a week, there is always a succession of fatuous individuals who believe men only advertise to benefit their fellows. They go shovelling their money into all sorts of gaudily advertised concerns, knowing as much about them as I do of the equator; and then how they scream when the kettle boils over, and the monkey hops off with the chestnuts! It is hard to expect one to be exactly honest while there are so many foolish people about. They say indiscriminate charity makes beggars. 'Tis such continuous credulity makes rogues. Now it is quite possible prejudiced people might class me in that latter category, but what does it signify as long as they fail to establish such mistaken theory in the eyes of the law? Ah, what a blessing it is that we have no such animal as a public prosecutor! Folks who have been gulled are loth to show what arrant fools they have been, by taking summary proceedings against men like me. Having lost your money it is small satisfaction to be laughed at besides."

At length something occurred to cut the thread of Mr. Lightfoot's reflections, and that gentleman arose and strolled leisurely towards the Bayswater Road.

"It's him, and no mistake," observed a sleek, close-cropped, dark complexioned man, as he sprang briskly from an adjacent seat, which had been masked from the philosopher's gaze by the intervening bushes. "I wonder what his game is this time? I should like to have followed the lady, and made out who she is. I can't follow them both—that is as clear as mud! Lightfoot, my boy, you've done me brown twice, take care I don't turn the tables this time! Tom Bullock's not the man to forgive being bowled out! What a bit of luck my happening to come here this morning?" and with this the detective commenced to dog the footsteps of his amateur brother with much skill and craftiness.

The situation reminds me of a story I was once told by an Indian sporting acquaintance. He was out after deer, and in the course of the day wounded one badly, and

commenced to track it. Before he had pursued his quarry a quarter of an hour he became somehow conscious that something was tracking him. "The sensation was uncomfortable," he continued. "I don't know how the deer felt, but I grew scary all over. Bear in mind I had never had a turn at big game of any sort, and was quite unprepared to encounter such. Picture my feelings when my shikarree, casting most uneasy looks over his shoulder, exclaimed,

"'Sahib! Sahib! I tink tiger after deer, and we between 'em!'"

"Good gracious! what did you do?" I asked.

"Do! why, stepped out of the way, of course!" replied my friend.

You see, we have Mr. Lightfoot on the track of Col-lingham, and there is a sharp watch-dog of the detective police, who, though Lightfoot does not know it, is busy upon his own trail. Will he also receive timely warning, and "step out of the way?"

Mr. Holbourne had never been favourably impressed with London. When you are accustomed to play the bashaw with three tails in your own country, there is something supremely levelling in the crush of the big city. Mr. Holbourne, the great Aldringham banker, was, of course, nobody in London. The metropolitan crowd trod on his toes, and ground his ribs, with slight reverence for his pompous and dignified appearance. The double gold eye-glasses that, when levelled, were wont to produce such an impression down at Aldringham, had once or twice elicited the somewhat opprobrious epithet of "old gig lamps" from the vulgar herd, and a conrumacious cabman had refused his proffered shilling, with the somewhat familiar and enigmatic remark, "Come, that won't fizz, governor!" Mr. Holbourne was horrified at the democratic strides of public opinion, and found it hard to believe that the rabble should dare to address a man of his undoubted respectability with such irreverence.

It is trying when the world refuses to acknowledge our position, and treats that dignity upon which we so pride ourselves with scant deference.

Mr. Holbourne finds himself of no more account in the

fashionable mob at the Royal Academy than he has been elsewhere during his London sojourn. He fumes and frets, pishes and pshas, as people tread on his feet, or jostle him in their anxiety to obtain a more favourable view of some picture recorded in the papers as among the elect of the year. Now and then, it is true, Grace's pretty face extorts courtesy from the men, which Mr. Holbourne acknowledges with much magnificence. It is on one of these happy occasions, while he is staring with his most patronizing air at a large painting, the subject of much varied criticism, that his daughter, who is standing a pace or two further back, is startled with a whisper behind her in well-known tones.

"Lose your father, Gracie," murmurs the voice, "and meet me at the entrance-wicket."

Miss Holbourne turns sharply round, and recognises her lover, already some two or three yards away. She gave a little nod in reply to his glance of interrogation; and, singular coincidence, within five minutes the banker misses his daughter. He naturally seeks his lost sheep round and round the room in which she has so unaccountably vanished.

To those unfortunates disapproved of by the authorities, there are few finer fields for the prosecution of their unlawful love-making than that vouchsafed by the Royal Academy. Losing your party there is easy enough when you would fain avoid doing so; but with disposition to evade it, nothing can be so simple. You may get separated from them before lunch, and return home late in the afternoon, wrathful, petulant, and abusive, protesting that you have spent hours hunting for them, that you are tired to death, that you have never been so miserable, and that you never, never, ne-ever will go anywhere with them again. You can enact the martyr till your own family feels penitent on the score of not taking proper care of you. Wise in her generation was the lady fair who first explained to me the manifold readings of "seeing the pictures."

"Charlie, Charlie, I did so want to see you!" said Miss Holbourne, as she greeted her lover at the above-named trysting-place.

"Well, I rather hoped so," returned the latter, laughing. "The reason why I addressed you in that melodramatic whisper——"

"Do be serious," she continued. "It is all over Aldringham that you are married, and it makes me very unhappy."

"It would make me very happy if it were true; but I trust it won't be long, Grace, before we prove Aldringham right, though a little premature in its knowledge."

"You always laugh," she replied, petulantly. "But do you think this is easy for me to bear? Marion more than suspects our secret, and never spares me an indirect jibe upon the subject."

"Ah! I was not wrong, then, in my first estimate of Miss Langworthy's character. Gracie, if you've become the target of a bitter woman's spiteful tongue, I shall change my programme—I cannot, must not leave you exposed to that."

"Oh! Charlie!" exclaimed the girl, rather penitently, as she saw how deeply her lover was moved, and so awoke to the consciousness that she had somewhat exaggerated her own woes, "I did not quite mean that. Marion is exasperating at times, and tries me sorely, but not beyond what it is quite possible to endure."

"Is it so?" he replied quickly, and looking keenly into her eyes. "Listen, Grace; it will not be long now before I claim you before all the world. It would be better that we should wait a little, I think; but it shall be for you to decide."

"No, Charlie, you—I trust you implicitly."

"Then, dearest, you must wait, with this proviso, that if Miss Langworthy should prove past bearing, you let me know. Concealment shall end then, hap what may. But I see your father approaching. Good-bye."

A warm clasp of the hand, and he was gone, leaving Grace to explain to her father how she had missed him in her own fashion.





CHAPTER XXII.

AN UNEQUAL BATTLE.

DRAPED in deepest mourning, her pale cheek resting on her hand, and her dark eyes lost in vacancy, sits Lettice, two days after the funeral. She is curled up, after her favourite fashion, in the window-seat of Reginald Holbourne's sitting-room. She is thinking dreamily what is to become of her? She is lost; she does not know exactly even how she is to live. She has locked up all her grandfather's papers till Reginald shall come back. She pored over them for four hours yesterday, but failed utterly to understand what she read. She does not know where his money, such as it was, came from. It might not be much, but it had enabled them two to live—if somewhat poorly, at all events in tolerable comfort. Had it all departed with him, and was she left destitute? She does not know; she cannot understand those papers. Her lips parted in a soft smile, as she murmured—"It does not much matter. I belong to Reginald now, and he must take care of me."

She had received one more letter from him since that last we had cognizance of, and has written to tell him of her grandfather's death. "Please come back," she urged, "as soon as you can; for not only am I very lonely and miserable, but I have no one to tell me what to do about my poor grandfather's affairs. I cannot

understand those musty law papers. I puzzled over them yesterday till my head ached. I don't know whether there is anything left for me to live on, or whether I ought to begin to earn my bread at once; and worse than all, Reginald, I don't know how to set about it, if it is so. Come back, dearest, as soon as you can, for your Lettice is in sore trouble, and not a soul in the world to look to but you. I know, of course, you cannot return till your errand, whatever it may be, is accomplished; but, that done, you will not linger, will you? but think of your own Lettice."

But though Lettice might well write despondently, that love-dream of hers served her well as yet. But for that her grandfather's death would have been utter desolation. She grieved much for the queer, querulous old man, who had so long been her protector and guardian; yet, wrapped in all the glamour of a girl's first passion, she did not feel it as she otherwise would have done. She is so assured of Reginald's love, so happy in the receipt of those letters, so confident, on his return, that all her troubles will be swept away; and yet even now the malevolent spirit that sways her destiny is approaching—wending its way up Baker Street in silken robes and high-heeled shoes, with heart pitiless and firm of purpose as a millstone. Little mercy need you hope, poor child, from a vindictive woman, who has fair grounds to consider herself wronged.

Slowly Marion Langworthy pursues her way up the street, bent on her errand of vengeance, should such be practicable. But she knows not her foe as yet, and this girl who has dared to step between her and Reginald may, perchance, be of a brazened kind, and not easy to cope with. Still Marion has implicit faith in her own powers of dissimulation, should such be necessary, and it is with resolute hand that she knocks at the door of Reginald's lodgings.

"Mr. Holbourne lives here, I believe?" she observed, interrogatively, as the door opened.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Sarah, "but he's abroad just now."

"I know. I want you, in the first place, to show me up to his rooms."

"Can't ma'am ; there's a lady in 'em," replied Sarah.

"A lady !" exclaimed Marion. "Oh, Miss Cheslett, I suppose. It is her I want to see. You can show me up."

"What name shall I say ?"

"Never mind my name. It is not likely Miss Cheslett would know it if she heard it. Say simply a lady to see her."

Marion followed the servant girl so closely up the stairs as almost to preclude any chance of denial.

Sarah, thoroughly abashed by the fashionably-dressed visitor, simply threw open the door of the sitting-room, and with the curt announcement, "A lady to see you, Miss," vanished.

Marion enters. At last she is face to face with this girl who has tempted Reginald from his allegiance. She starts involuntarily, as a shy, timid, shrinking figure, clad in deepest mourning, comes hesitatingly forward to greet her.

Marion is mistress of the situation at a glance. Not much to be feared in this encounter, is her first thought. The girl is pretty, very pretty, is her second. Not likely that latter admission will incline Miss Langworthy to show much mercy.

"You wish to see me," faltered Lettice, after a pause of some seconds, during which Marion surveyed her with an insolent stare. "Or it may be that you come to see Mr. Holbourne, for these are his rooms."

"I came to see you," replied Marion, in slow, measured tones, "although I scarcely expected to find you in Mr. Holbourne's apartments."

"No, of course not. I must explain," said Lettice, blushing.

"Better not, I think ; the explanation could but be painful to you, and I fancy I am tolerably well aware of the circumstances."

"You are very kind to spare me the story," said the girl, simply, little dreaming of the misconstruction that her visitor placed upon her words. "But will you not sit down ?"

Marion seated herself with the slightest possible incli-

nation of her head, in acknowledgment of her hostess's courtesy.

"You have lived here some time?" she asked.

"About eighteen months, I think. I did not like it at first, but I have got fond of the place now."

"Perhaps the relation you have stood in latterly to Mr. Holbourne makes a difference?" remarked Miss Langworthy, suavely.

"Ah, yes, it is that. Has Reginald told you, then? You are a friend, connection of his—is it not so?" And Lettice clasped her hands and looked eagerly at her visitor.

"I am his cousin."

"And has he told you about me?" said the girl, as she crossed and placed herself on a low stool at Marion's feet. "I did not know he had yet spoken to his family. From what he said, I thought he was afraid that they might not like it. But you will befriend us, will you not? I do love him so, and I am left now all alone!"

"Either this girl is a consummate fool, or I've not read my riddle right," mused Marion. "So you are very fond of him, child?"

"Yes," she murmured, blushing. "He stole my heart before I knew I had one; he had it, shame on me, before he asked it! Was it he sent you to see me?" she continued shyly.

"No," replied Marion; and then, with a sudden inspiration, she added, "You must promise solemnly not to let Reginald know that you have seen me until I give you leave."

Lettice hesitated, and then said timidly, "I don't like having secrets from Reginald."

"But suppose it is both for his good and yours, child," retorted Miss Langworthy sharply.

"You would not have come to see me unless you meant to be a friend to me," murmured the girl slowly. "I promise."

"See you keep it. How long have you been living here—these rooms, I mean?"

"Since my grandfather's death," replied Lettice in a low voice.

Once more Miss Langworthy was puzzled. They were playing at cross purposes those two. Yet, although her rival stood apparently condemned out of her own mouth, Marion, as she looked at her, felt intuitively that no guilty love was Lettice's, and wondrous quick is woman's instinct in such matters. But Miss Langworthy had little intention of letting that conviction influence her further proceedings.

"I suppose it never occurred to you," she resumed, "that people might remark upon your intimacy with Reginald Holbourne?"

Lettice opened her eyes wide for a moment, and then with a smile said, "Who are to trouble themselves about me? I know no one."

"But you never thought what the neighbours might say," continued Marion, pertinaciously.

"What should they say?—why should they notice me?" cried the girl quickly, as she became instinctively aware that danger was impending. "And who are you that question me so closely?"

"Who am I?" returned Marion, in clear ringing tones—"I am Reginald Holbourne's affianced wife. What have I come for?—to confront Reginald Holbourne's mistress, and to judge for myself whether he has offended past forgiveness."

Lettice bounded to her feet; the blood crimsoned neck, cheek, and temple to the very roots of her hair. But it was the righteous blush of indignation that dyed her face, not the tell-tale banner of shame.

"You wicked woman!" she gasped at length, "how can you tell such falsehoods, when you know I am Reginald's promised bride?"

"Promised bride!" sneered Miss Langworthy. "Do men lodge promised brides in their bachelor quarters? Do men of good position like Reginald Holbourne wed nobodies like you? Do men wed with the shop-girls with whom they may amuse their idle hours? Some rumours of this reached my ears some time back. I'll have no more of it, and he shall choose between you and me. You say you love him: such as you never love; but should your influence prove stronger than

mine, you will be his ruin, if that's any satisfaction to you."

Lettice stood as if stunned. For the first time she recognised what construction could be placed upon her inhabiting Reginald's rooms in his absence—how innocently, we already know. For the first time it was brought home to her how her intimacy with Reginald might be interpreted. Child as she was, and guileless of the world's ways, she might well be thunderstruck at the fell charge brought against her. For a few seconds she cowered as if stricken to the ground by her ruthless assailant; then rearing her head proudly, she replied,

"That I am not what you call me, you know. The people of the house can tell you I have inhabited these rooms but a few days, and that in consequence of my grandfather's sudden death, which left my own no fit place for me for a time!" She could not suppress an hysterical sob here, but mastered herself bravely and went on—"You say you are Reginald's affianced bride, and being that, you could bring yourself to believe this of him? You say such as I cannot love. If so, I know not what you ladies call love. I could sacrifice myself for him, and if his love for me bodes him ill, he shall never see me again. My heart may break—let it—it were best so. If I am never to see him more, it matters little what happens to me. But I could not have spoken such cruel words as you have done even to a dog that he had once caressed."

She ceased, and the tears gushed tempestuously from her eyes. It was but for a few moments, and then she dashed them impatiently aside.

"What would you next?" she cried almost fiercely. "Do you wish to look further on the misery you have wrought? or what is it that you have come for?"

Marion felt a certain admiration for the girl's courageous vindication of herself and her lover, but wavered no iota in her purpose. She had come there to break this connection, if possible. She saw now that her task was easier than she had looked for.

"If I have done you wrong, blame yourself," she replied coldly. "If I took you for Reginald's mistress, it

is but what the gossip of your own street would endorse. If he has but filled your foolish head with the idea of being his wife, he has done you less harm than I thought."

"He means me to be his wife, and I can trust him!" cried the girl indignantly.

"And this is your love! I say nothing of the claims I have upon him, but if he weds you, it will be at the sacrifice of every family tie he has—certain rupture with his father, who will scarce consent to receive a girl picked up in a lodging-house as his daughter. His people are likely to resent the affront put upon me sharply, and do you think I shall bid them stay their hand?"

"No," moaned Lettice, "from the way you have treated me, I can fancy what mercy you would mete out to those that should offend you. "But," she continued defiantly, "I could be more to him than you ever can. If he married you, would you ever forgive his treason?"

Marion's eyes flashed fiercely, for the last shaft came home. She knew, hap what might, she should be little likely to condone Reginald's lapse of allegiance; but it was in cold, steely tones she replied,

"And you think you can be all in all to him? Have you pictured him alienated from his father, sister, kindred—all assistance, pecuniary or otherwise, that might enable him to push his way through the world forfeited, because he lost his head about your chit's face, and in a mad moment of passion made you his wife?"

The battle was too unequal. Lettice, with only the great light of her love to guide her inexperience, pitted against a cool, calculating, worldly woman such as Marion, who was making capital of that very love to win the crafty game she was playing. There was silence between them for some minutes. Lettice had thrown herself upon the sofa and buried her face in her hands, while Miss Langworthy was too astute not to give her last speech time to work.

"What is it you want?" cried the girl at last, raising her head and looking her visitor full in the face. "What is it you have come for?"

"Come for?" replied Marion, with more animation

than she had yet shown, while a relentless light glittered in her pale blue eyes. "I have come to see the woman for whom Reginald Holbourne would sacrifice his honour—to look upon the face that had lured him to break his plighted word—to see what he was to get in exchange for all the prospects he forfeited—to see," and her voice sank to a fierce whisper, "what she might be like who had dared to come between him and me!"

Lettice shrank beneath the bitter words, but only covered her face with her hands, and spoke not.

"You talk of your love, and declare if it boded him harm you would never see him more," continued Marion, vehemently, "What do you say now? I tell you it is destruction to him to wed you. Will you act up to your words, and disappear from his sight—bury yourself so that he shall seek vainly for a trace of you, or will you face the storm of a jealous woman's wrath, and expose him to the worst that she can work on him and you? Speak! speak!—if it is but to confess your love falters at such sacrifice—that it is no purer nor better than mine, nor of a vintage strong enough to turn to such gall as mine is capable of!"

"I do love him—love him in a fashion that you cannot comprehend. If he wronged me ever so cruelly I could but go on loving him. What is it you require of me? You say I shall be ruin to his whole life if he wed me. That, then, shall he never. But forgive me if I say," continued Lettice, rising, drawing her girlish figure to its full height, and looking proudly at her adversary—"forgive me if I say that it will be equal ruin to his life should he marry you. You do not love him, and will never forget that he once forgot you. Say what you would have of me."

"That you disappear from this, and leave not a trace behind," replied Marion, sternly—"that all communication between you cease from this time. Whether he and I are ever anything to each other again or not, I am doing him a good turn when I step between him and you. Will you promise?"

Lettice bowed her head.

"Then I have done my errand," said Marion, rising.

"It is little likely that Reginald Holbourne will ever be more than cousin to me now. I shall, thanks to you—and you do love him dearly, or you'd not have promised it—save his life from shipwreck at the outset. If I have thought evil of you, and said bitter things to you, I now ask your pardon." And, with a frank smile, Miss Langworthy extended her hand.

A slight shudder ran through Lettice's frame as she shook her head gently.

"No," she replied; "I will keep my promise, but I cannot touch your hand. Your lips have brought too cruel a charge against me for us to part friends."

"As you will," returned Marion, with a forced laugh. "I will bid you good-bye, then." And, with a haughty inclination of her head, Miss Langworthy made her way to the door. Pausing there for a moment, she turned and said, slowly, "Don't forget you promised not to mention my visit."

"But I must!" cried Lettice, passionately. "I cannot go away without leaving a line of explanation. How shall I make him understand without mentioning your name?"

"I have nothing to do with that—you pledged yourself not to mention it, and I expect you to keep your word." And, so saying, Marion closed the door behind her, and departed.

For a few seconds Lettice stood, with parted lips and eyes fixed in stony stare upon the door. Womanly pride, and indignation at the scandalous accusation that her visitor had ventured to bring against her, had so far sustained her, but now she awoke to the consciousness that her love-dream was shattered. She felt dazed. She to be taunted with working evil to Reginald, who felt she could give her life for him! Life! she had promised to do more—to sacrifice her love. "Oh! that I could but die!" she murmured; "it were easy that, compared with what I have pledged myself to. Who is this woman? His cousin, she said, and I never even thought to ask her name! Is her story true?" And, as she asked herself the question, she shuddered, for she felt intuitively that it was so. Reginald had never spoken to

her of his relations, but, young as she was, she could quite understand that they might fiercely oppose his marriage with herself.

"All alone!" she cried, piteously, as she threw herself upon the sofa. "None in the world have I to look to for counsel or protection save him, and that cruel woman says I am wrecking his life by loving him! What's to become of me I don't know; but they shall never have the power to say that it was I who brought trouble on him. And yet I know he loves me—he will be sore at heart when he returns and finds his Lettice gone. How could he ever have cared for that cold, insolent woman, with her merciless eyes? He never did—she must have entrapped him into wooing her. If there were such things as love-philtres, I'd say she had given him one."

Strong in her new-born love, Lettice had not as yet recognised how desolate she was left—now, for the first time, she was brought face to face with the grim fact that she had to brave the world alone. She tramped up and down the room with tearless eyes, but the quivering lip, and fretful nervous movement of her hands, showed how she yet wrestled with her agony. Her voice sounded strange to herself as she bade Sarah take away her tea and close the shutters; and that handmaiden, as she regarded the untouched tray, ventured to ask if she was unwell.

"No. What should make you think so?" replied Lettice, sharply. "One does not always want tea and toast."

Sarah made no response, but came to the conclusion that the strange lady had upset Miss Lettice; but as she had nobody to confide her opinion to except the cook, and the cockroaches that shared the kitchen with her, there was little speculation on Lettice's conduct that evening in Baker Street.

"Oh! bed! bed! delicious bed!
That heaven upon earth to the weary head,
Whether lofty or low its condition!"

But when the sun streamed into Lettice's bed-room next morning it was greeted by a tear-stained face, and a pair of dark eyes heavy with weeping, that showed little sign of refreshing slumber.



CHAPTER XXIII.

MISS MEGGOTT IS DECEIVED.

MISS MEGGOTT is whisking about the sitting-room at Brompton, duster in hand, attempting to set that somewhat chaotic apartment in order. Miss Meggott does not condescend to meddle with bed-rooms, but it is a stipulation between her and her lodgers that no housemaid's unhallowed hands were to interfere with their books and papers.

"There, it looks a little better now," she said, pausing in the midst of her labours to take stock of the effect. "I should like to right up those two tables, but, bless me, I daren't. I should be mixing tragedies and comedies, leading and magazine articles, and never hear the last of it. Very littery are these literary gentlemen!"—And Miss Meggott indulged in a quaint little smile at her own joke. "They keep their very papers in such a muddle, it's a wonder they don't make awful mistakes at times. Perhaps they do, and that's when the reviews let 'em have it. However, they don't seem to mind much when they do. I have never felt it my duty to place their razors under restraint when the newspapers write their wickedest concerning 'em. Mr. Donaldson seems to take it out in tobacco—the more they abuse him the more he smokes; while as for Mr. Collingham, it's my impression he passes it on, and just pitches into some one else in the *Misanthrope*. There, it's fit for a Christian

to sit down in now!" continued Miss Meggott, as she glanced round the room, "and I wonder how long they'll leave it so?"

A peal at the door-bell interrupted that young lady's reflections, and she hastened to answer the summons. She found herself confronted by an elderly man, whose long grizzled hair overflowed his coat-collar. He was decently dressed, but there was an aspect of respectable poverty about the well-brushed and somewhat threadbare garments that was unmistakeable. His hat showed sign of much careful manipulation, and there were cracks yet visible in his well-darned gloves. In somewhat timid manner he asked if Mr. Donaldson was at home.

"No," replied Polly, curtly, "he's not, nor likely to be till about five."

"Oh, dear!" said the man, shuffling his feet nervously to and fro on the step; "and he promised to see me at twelve. It is a matter of the utmost importance to me, although I don't suppose he ever thought of that. You see," he continued, while his restless fingers kept continually buttoning and unbuttoning his coat, "it is a little matter of money, a trifle of no consequence to him, but it represents fire and food to me and mine. Times have gone badly with me of late," and here a racking cough convulsed the speaker. "Could I write a line to him anywhere?" he gasped, when he had somewhat recovered. "He would be sorry, I know, to think his carelessness had caused an old friend considerable distress."

Polly's womanly heart was melted, and it was in much subdued tones that she bid the stranger come in; and ushering him up to the sitting-room, placed pen and paper before him. He took off his hat, and put on a pair of spectacles with great deliberation, but as his trembling fingers took the pen, he was seized with another paroxysm of coughing that threatened to shake his feeble frame almost to pieces. "Water! water!" he gasped at length, and Polly, who was really frightened, flew downstairs to procure some. No sooner were her footsteps out of hearing than a singular change manifested itself in the old gentleman—the racking cough

was replaced by an unmistakable chuckle, and jumping from his chair with an agility much at variance with his hitherto debilitated manner, he crossed as quick as thought, to the nearest writing-table. "Ah! this is the wrong one!" he muttered, after a cursory glance at the handwriting of one or two of the manuscript sheets that lay scattered about—"the other is Collingham's." In a second he was there, and had tried the drawers. "All open but one," he continued, "and that of course is the only one it is worth my while to tumble over. But here comes my hostess," and regaining his seat quickly, he rested his head upon his hands, and appeared completely exhausted by the paroxysm he had gone through.

Polly bustled in with her glass of water, of which the old gentleman took a few sips, and then endeavoured to resume his pen, but his hand shook so that he was forced once more to lay it aside.

"I beg your pardon for the trouble I am giving," he said, in a low voice. "but these attacks leave me so prostrate that I am really incapable of anything for a time. Allow me a few minutes, please," and as he spoke he placed his hand upon his heart, and appeared to breath painfully.

"Let me get you a glass of wine, sir, or a little brandy-and-water," said Miss Meggott, soothingly.

She really quite felt for this poor afflicted old gentleman, and thought Mr. Donaldson deserving of much reprobation for such careless neglect of his appointment.

"Thanks, no, my dear," replied the old gentleman. "The doctors prohibit all stimulant of that nature. If—but it would be giving you too much trouble——"

"Never mind about the trouble," replied Polly, quickly. "If you can mention anything that will do you good, I will get it, if it's to be got."

"It's very kind of you. If you would not mind running round to the nearest chemist's for a strong dose of laudanum and ammonia, such as is commonly given to people troubled with a bad spasmodic cough, you would confer a real service on me." And here the old gentleman was troubled with another though milder attack.

"Laudanum and ammonia," repeated Polly—"I'll fetch it. You stay quiet here till I come back." And Miss Meggott sped away on her errand.

The sufferer remained motionless till he heard the slam of the street-door, then, rising with a grin of intense satisfaction pervading his features, he exclaimed, "Mankind are very gullible—especially women. It is really no credit deceiving them. That's a sharp girl, and yet this is a second occasion within a few weeks on which I have fooled her. But I mustn't lose time. Now for this drawer. It didn't look anything elaborate in locks, and I should think will answer to one of these." As he spoke he drew from his pocket a varied collection of keys, and one or two instruments appertaining to lock-picking.

In less than five minutes his dexterous fingers had succeeded in forcing back the lock, and he was running hastily over the contents of the drawer, but apparently without result. "Nothing here," he muttered, "to give one any clue. If he ever was married, and keeps any letters or papers that show proof of such marriage, he doesn't keep them here, that's clear. I wonder whether it is possible to get at his bed-room? I am afraid not. It would be risky to stay much longer—one of them might turn up. Ah," he exclaimed, as the ring of the street bell caught his quick ear, "my Hebe is back with the nauseating nectar. I must swallow it and depart. You will have to pay high, Miss Langworthy, for such dread service as this," and so saying, he hastily closed the drawer and resumed his original seat.

"Here is what you want," said Miss Meggott, as she entered breathless, "but I hope you are more yourself by this;" and Polly, placing a small phial on the table, hastened to get a wine-glass.

Mr. Lightfoot—for of course the reader has already recognised him—poured the draught he had sent for leisurely in the glass and drank it. "Yes," he said, "I am better, much better, and this will do me good besides. I will just leave a line for Mr. Donaldson, and then go." Seizing a pen, he wrote rapidly for a minute or two, then folding the letter up addressed it.

"There," he said at length, "if you would give him

that when he returns I should be obliged. Donaldson has a good heart, and means well," continued Mr. Lightfoot, abstractedly, "but he is thoughtless—very thoughtless. That is to pay for my medicine, I only wish my poverty did not prevent my acknowledging your kindness besides, but you must rest content with an old man's thanks," and as he spoke Mr. Lightfoot presented Polly with a shilling, very much to that young woman's dismay. For Miss Meggott was powerfully impressed by this case of genteel poverty, and instead of taking that shilling, would like to have bestowed one on the donor, had she known how to do so without giving offence.

Polly looked after him with a heart overflowing with sympathy, as he limped down the street leaning heavily on his stick.

"Poor old fellow," she muttered, "it was downright shameful to take his shilling, but what could I do? It was too bad of Mr. Donaldson to forget his appointment."

Polly's eyes would have opened wide could she have seen the object of her commiseration discard his limp as he turned the corner, stride along for half a mile or so, most vigorous of elderly gentlemen, and finally hailing a hansom, bid the driver energetically to drive like——to Pentonville Road. "Playing detective for Miss Langworthy," ruminated Mr. Lightfoot, "has so far been an easy and profitable business, but she has set me a stiffish riddle to solve this time. It is a great question whether this Collingham ever was married. At all events, I can't procure a rag of evidence as to that fact to begin with—let alone where it was done, and who was the lady. I wonder whether Miss Langworthy is knocking her head against a wall. She's a cutish young woman, but admitted that she was not very clear on this point—that it was but conjecture after all. Well, I've made nothing of it so far, and haven't even got the end of a thread wherewith to start the unravelling of the tangle as yet. If I could only be assured that he had been married, I'd bet my life I got at it in time, but there's no use hunting for proof of a marriage knot that never was tied. Till I can get hold of some evidence that there was a wedding, it's no use going into where it took place."

In Pentonville Road Mr. Lightfoot dismissed his cab, and strolled thence leisurely towards his own residence in John Street. As he approached it, he was struck by the appearance of a respectable artisan, who was lounging on the opposite pavement. A low laugh broke from Mr. Lightfoot as he took stock of this individual; then, once more assuming a limp, and leaning heavily on his stick, he crossed the road, and inquired timidly of the stranger "which was 22?—could he tell him whether Mr. Lightfoot lived at 22 or 23?—he was short of sight and scant of memory, getting old, in short; he had an appointment with that gentleman." The artisan retorted gruffly that he "was a stranger in the neighbourhood, and knewd nothin' about no Lightfoots nor anyone else." To which the lame old gentleman responded with a little bow, and then, recrossing the road, knocked at 22. The stranger observed this proceeding in a lazy way, as he stood with his hands in his pockets, sucking a short black pipe; but his nonchalant air was considerably upset when, upon the door being opened, the infirm old man, facing about, laid his forefinger playfully to the side of his nose, bestowed upon him a most significant wink, and finally kissing his hand affectionately, exclaimed, "Bye-bye, Bullock!" and vanished.

The detective slunk away completely chapfallen. It was quite a craze of his, and a subject of much ridicule amongst his mates, this fierce antipathy he held to Leonidas Lightfoot. The truth was, Mr. Bullock was an enthusiast in his profession, and Mr. Lightfoot had upon two occasions proved too clever of fence for him. His fellows had chaffed him much upon the way that astute adventurer had bamboozled him, or, in their vernacular, "put the double on him," and vowed that all his energies should be devoted to a return match. He had lost all sight of his adversary since their last passage of arms, till he had come across him accidentally that morning in Kensington Gardens. He had tracked him home upon that occasion, and had since dedicated much of his spare time to observation of that gentleman's dwelling, in the hope of once more obtaining an inkling of his nefarious pursuits. It is not to be supposed that

Mr. Bullock had not recognised his antipathy's delicate touch in more than one instance—witness his call upon the editor of the *Morning Misanthrope*—but he had succeeded in laying hold of no offence against the law upon which he could take positive action. He conned the *Times* advertisement-sheet carefully, and now and again put his finger upon an insidious notice which he pronounced Lightfoot's composition—traps for the unwary all. But whether the public fell into such traps or not, he was without knowledge. If they did, they submitted to the shearing without outcry or appeal to the police.

And now his *bête noire* actually detects him watching his dwelling—speaks to him so cleverly disguised, withal, that he, Mr. Bullock, fails to penetrate it, and then laughs at his beard. It was enough to bring salt tears into the eyes of a man enthusiastic in his art, and looked upon as a shining light of Scotland-yard.

"This would be a nice story to get round," muttered Mr. Bullock, as he slunk away discomfited. "I shall have a nice time of it if ever my pals get hold of this. I could never stand it. They'd laugh me clean out of the force. To think of Tom Bullock, who's supposed to be up to a trick or two, and has got the reputation of being one of the smartest officers in the 'Yard,' being bamboozled like a country policeman. Done, diddled, sold, clean, by the very party he was supposed to be keeping an eye upon! It's all very well to talk," he grumbled, "but I don't suppose there's one of our lot ever tackled such a slippery customer as this. Confound him!" exclaimed Mr. Bullock, with enthusiasm, "he is clever! To give the devil his due, he *is* clever! He just saw through my disguise quick as wink, and what a make-up his own was! I never twigged him no more than if I'd been a baby! Blessed if I didn't think he was an old buffer who'd been caught by one of those crafty advertisements he's always putting in the papers, and that I might make something of it if I waited till he came out again. But I don't mean to be beat. Lightfoot, my boy, you've scored one, but one point don't make game at anything that's played, and

those that score first don't always win." With which philosophical reflection, Mr. Bullock wended his way homewards.

When Jim Donaldson returned home, he was much astonished at the asperity with which Miss Meggott greeted him.

"It's too bad of you, Mr. Donaldson, making an appointment with an old gentleman who, it's my belief, is not long for this world, and not being here to keep it," said Polly. "To say nothing, poor soul, of his being evidently in distress, and looking anxiously for your promised assistance. He spoke better of you than you deserved, for he said you had a good heart, though you were thoughtless—very thoughtless."

"Polly," retorted Donaldson, "I have very great respect for you, but whether you are suffering from insanity, or imbibing champagne at midday, I am not as yet quite clear."

"It's all very well to try and laugh it off," replied Miss Meggott, "but if you had seen how ill he was, and what a cough he'd got!"

"Stop!" interrupted Donaldson; "I had no appointment of any kind with anyone. Your old gentleman was a flam, if he came to see me."

"What!" cried Miss Meggott; "why, he's left a note for you—here it is!"

Donaldson ran his eye over it—"Regrets not finding me at home, hopes to be more fortunate on some future occasion. Yours respectfully, Cornelius Walkingham."

"Don't know such a person, never heard the name in my life—there, read it;" and as he tossed her the note, Jim remarked quietly, "I suppose he went in for chops and sherry, Polly?"

"Do you mean to say," replied Miss Meggott, getting very red in the face, and speaking with great deliberation, "that he was an imposter?"

Donaldson nodded. "What was the extent of his plundering?"

"I don't believe it!" cried Polly, vehemently; "he took nothing, would have nothing: he was seized with a terrible fit of coughing, for which I ran out and got him

some medicine he asked for, and he gave me a shilling to pay for it."

"Well, I don't know his object, or whether he has taken anything away with him, but he had no appointment with me, nor did I ever hear his name in my life; and I have no hesitation in asserting, Polly, that you have been once more imposed upon, though with what reason I confess I do not understand."

Miss Meggott stoutly combated this view of the case, although, at the bottom of her heart, lurked a horrible suspicion that it was the truth as regarded that elderly visitor. "But," she argued, "what could be his object?—nothing was missing—why such a causeless mystification?" And to all this Jim Donaldson had nothing to say

"Really," he exclaimed, at length, when Polly's eloquence began to worry him, "I am too much bothered weaving my own plots to have inclination to unravel other people's."





CHAPTER XXIV

ALONE IN THE WORLD.

FETTICE stole into the sitting-room the morning after Miss Langworthy's visit with a vague sensation of terror. Was it possible that the neighbourhood credited her with such shame as Marion had dared to allege they did? She shrank from Sarah as she brought in the breakfast, as the thought struck her, "Perhaps she deems me the vile thing that pitiless woman called me? What am I to do?" she moans, inwardly—"what power have I to rebut this scandal? None. Reginald only could right me, and scarce that, save by marriage. He loves me well, and, if I wait and tell him all, he will do it. But is this the love I have been so proud of? Is it so women should love? Shall I bring ruin upon him? No; I stand all alone, and what happens to me concerns only myself. Better my fair name should perish than that I should drag him down in the world. It is hard, too," she cried, as the tears rained down her cheeks, "when life looked all so sweet, to see it thus shattered on the threshold! Did he deceive me? No, I'll not believe that of him. I have won his love, but that woman holds his plighted troth. Wrung from him how, I know not; but she vows his ruin if he fails to keep it. Reginald, my dearest, what I have promised would seem less bitter, if it were not for the thought that she may one day be your bride. Girl as I am, I can see

what misery such a wedding will bring to you. My wretchedness will be no greater than yours, if ever she should call herself your wife."

One thing only is clear to Lettice at present, that she must go away and hide herself. "I have done no wrong," she murmured, "but the people around hold me guilty. I cannot stay here—I should be afraid to go outside the house. False as the accusation is, I should sink with shame to meet the eyes of those that deem it true. Ah! Reginald," she cried, in her agony, "was it well to expose me to this? You might have known what scandal those pleasant country excursions would give rise to! I, poor fool, thought only of how sweet it was to be with you—to listen to the song of the birds, to gaze upon the green fields and glittering waters, nor dreamt the world was whispering away my good name! 'Tis done, 'tis gone, and I, your love, am left a thing for honest women to shrink from."

Lettice, in her present overwrought frame of mind, her love-dream shattered, her character, as she thinks, blasted, derived her sole ray of comfort from the thought of the sacrifice she was about to make. She would disappear and leave no trace behind her. Let the world deem her Reginald Holbourne's mistress if they would, she would not gainsay it. Marrying her involved ruin to him she was told; that she would never bring upon him. He at least should know how devotedly, how purely she had loved him. That Marion's allegation was derived only from her own vindictive, cynical temper, never crossed Lettice's mind for an instant. In reality, Baker Street had troubled itself little about her movements, and the breath of scandal had scarce scorched her fair fame; but so stricken was Lettice by the foul imputation, that she never dreamt that her cruel assailant might be speaking with slender grounds to go upon. She had been so overwhelmed by the construction Miss Langworthy had placed upon her occupying Reginald's rooms that she deemed assertion of her innocence would be credited by no one. She hardly dared to dwell upon what the people of the house might think of her, knowing though they did all the circumstances of the case. In her own eyes,

poor child, she stood convicted of want of modesty in having consented to occupy her lover's rooms.

Till this slander reared its head, it had never occurred to Lettice's mind that it was anything but natural that she should do so under the circumstances; now she regarded everything through a poisoned lens. She fancied the blight that had descended upon her reputation was bruited abroad far and wide—that all the neighbourhood were cognisant of the slur cast upon her good name. She pictured to herself the averted heads of the women, the bold, insolent stare of the men. True, she had hardly an acquaintance, but to Lettice, in her present excited state, it seemed that her story must be known to all Baker Street. Yes, she must go away and hide herself—bury herself somewhere in the big city, so that none might ever discover her; and then Lettice literally cowered on the sofa beneath the weight of her woe.

Towards evening she put on her bonnet, and trusting to the protection of her heavy crape veil, crept out. She was infinitely relieved to find that no one noticed her; and once clear of her own immediate neighbourhood, Lettice sped rapidly on her errand. Down Weymouth Street she walked swiftly, turned up Portland Place, and quickly made her way into the Euston Road; past the huge termini of the Midland and Great Northern Railways, till she comes upon the borders of "Merrie Islington." Lettice turns up to her left a little before she comes to the "Angel," and finally knocks at the door of a quiet house in John Street. It was here that she and her grandfather had lived previously to setting up their tent in Baker Street, and Lettice has come to see if their old landlady will once more take her in.

A maid unknown to her responds to Lettice's ring, and, in reply to her inquiry for Mrs. Bopps, straightway ushers her into that respectable matron's sanctum.

"Lor, if it ain't Miss Lettice!" exclaimed that stout and buxom landlady, as she rose to welcome her visitor. "Why, you're as welcome, my dear, as the flowers in May! My gracious! how you have grown! why, you're quite a woman now. Dear, dear, time slips away—it seems as if you only left yesterday, and yet

it must be getting on two years since you lived with me!"

"Very near," replied Lettice, in somewhat unsteady tones. "I have come to see if you can take me in again. I have just lost my grandfather."

"Poor thing!" replied the sympathetic landlady. "I might have guessed it," she continued, with a glance at the girl's black dress, "but I was, so to say, struck all of a heap at seeing your pretty face again, that I forgot to notice what your frock betokened. Well, well, I'm sorry for poor Mr. Cheslett; he was a good, quiet, pleasant gentleman, but he was old, and it's what we must all come to. Are you all alone in the world now, Miss Lettice?"

"All alone," she replied, struggling hard with a sob that rose in her throat. "None in this huge city can be more desolate than I." And here that awkward, choking sensation would be no longer denied; but Lettice burst into tears, and sobbed as if her heart would break. Mrs. Bopps's question had recalled vividly to her recollection how entirely alone in the world she now stood.

That good lady soothed and comforted Lettice to the best of her ability, and when the girl became a little calmer, Mrs. Bopps gave her to understand that she could have her own old room on the second floor, if that would suit her. The landlady had always been fond of and kind to the motherless child in the days when she and her grandfather had lodged with her, and they had resided in the house for hard upon three years.

Lettice dried her eyes, and then had to submit to much questioning on Mrs. Bopps's past, as to how things had fared with her lately. The jolly landlady meant well, yet could not refrain from some sly inquiries as to whether such a pretty girl had not attracted a lover to her side by this; but the tears in Lettice's eyes, and her troubled face, warning her from pursuing such badinage. After some little further conversation Lettice rose and declared she must return home; and having arranged to take possession of her room on the morrow, bade her friend good night.

She felt much relieved in mind as she threaded her

way back to Baker Street—all was settled now, and to-morrow she would disappear from Reginald's ken, and be lost to him for ever. A shudder ran through the girl's frame at the thought. She was never to see him more! For his sake, to save him from the evil that his love for her promised to bring upon him, she was going to vanish utterly, amidst the wilds of the huge Babylon, leaving behind but a vile stigma on her name; and then, as she reflected on her utter loneliness, her lips quivered. Brave heart as Lettice had, she could but wonder a little what was to become of her.

She was astir by times the next morning, and busied herself in packing up her things. Her grandfather's books and papers, too, took some time to put together. Lettice could not repress a shiver as she moved about the old rooms, and thought how a bare three weeks ago, she had given Reginald that cup of coffee before his departure. She still seemed to hear the sharp click of the scissors as that tress of her hair fell upon the carpet, to feel his farewell kiss upon her cheek. What sunshine all was then!—what desolation now! All was finished at last, and, sending for the landlady, Lettice announced her sudden departure. Manifold were that lady's ejaculations of astonishment, and more than one curious interrogation did she hazard concerning such hasty resolution on Miss Cheslett's part; but Lettice was very reticent, and replied merely that she was going to stay with an old friend for some time.

Having settled her bill, Lettice sat down to rest. One thing only remained to be done, but that was by no means the easiest of all the tasks she had set herself that morning. She must write one last letter to Reginald, and the writing of that letter, she knew, would cost her much anguish, and wring her heart-strings sore.

It is no light matter for a woman passionately in love to say a final farewell to the object of that love at any time. But picture to yourself a mere girl like Lettice—her fair fame already stained through that honest love of hers, now called upon to tear it up by the very roots! She has no sympathizing friends nor relations to pour words of comfort into her ears, to solace her in her

trouble, to mitigate her grief. She must face her sorrow single-handed, as she best may.

For some time she ponders over that letter—at last she takes her seat at the table, and dips her pen in ink. Four or five times does she write rapidly for a few minutes, then stop and tear the sheet into the smallest possible fragments. But at last she seems more satisfied, and the pen traverses the paper in steady and continuous fashion.

“I must say good-bye,” she wrote, “though my heart tells me it were better not—that it were best I should disappear, and leave not a line behind me. But that, Reginald, is more than I can bear. You must, at all events, know why I fly from you. They tell me your family would cast you off, if you dared to think of marrying me—that you are already pledged to another, that I should but bring ruin on your future. I could not do that—I love you too well. If we part, dearest, it is for your good; better that I should suffer alone than become a mill-stone round your neck. How sweet to me has been the treasure of your love, you will never know. I cannot tell it, nor make you understand what it was to me. It is gone now. I must never see you more, and bear my sorrow as I best may—one thing only I ask at at your hands; slander is busy with my name, and has linked it foully with yours; you will do me justice—will you not?—and contradict that vile falsehood, as far as is within your power. You should have spared me this; you knew how ignorant of the world’s ways I was, and ought to have guarded the fame of one innocent of all, save love for you.

“Was it fair to me, Reginald, to win my heart while you were bound to another? And yet I cannot blame you. I believe I had your love, though that other might hold your promise. I like to think so—it is some solace to me now to dream that your love was mine for a little, happen what may. I think I could have been a good wife to you, but it is useless to muse on what might have been. They have made me see but too clearly that we must part. Pity me a little, Reginald, for my future looks so dreary that I hardly dare to think of it. I

scarce know what I write, for my eyes are blind with weeping. I would fain tell you all that has happened, but I have promised not. God bless you, my dearest! In memory of some wrong that you have done her, perhaps unwittingly, think sometimes of one who can still only sign herself your own

“LETTICE.”

This written, and addressed to “Reginald Holbourne, Esq.,” Lettice rang the bell, and ordered a cab. She placed her letter in a conspicuous place on the mantelpiece, and, moreover, exhorted Sarah to call the attention of the proprietor of the rooms to it when he returned from abroad. Then she bade adieu to her landlady and the afflicted Sarah, seated herself in the midst of her belongings, and directed the cabman to drive to Farringdon Street Station. She was not exactly going there, but she wished to leave behind no clue to her new residence. In pursuance of this scheme, Lettice had herself and her boxes deposited at Farringdon Street and dismissed her cab. Taking a fresh one, after a little, she drove to Mrs. Bopps’s, and deemed she had effectually severed herself from all whom she had known the last two years.





CHAPTER XXV.

HOME AGAIN.



SHORT, chopping sea. A heavy, turbulent, south-westerly gale, blowing noisily up channel, and rolling the vexed waters before it into a sheet of foam, causing the fretting waves to lash and break in fitful indignation at the fierce pressure it puts upon their caprices, forcing them back upon their tidal impetus with a blustering might, at which they rebel savagely, and toss their white crests aloft in impotent derision. For the wind is master of the waters, vainly though the latter would repudiate the yoke. A steamer, pitching, lurching, and driving, makes her way heavily through the seething cauldron. But one passenger is on deck, for it is "a naughty night to swim in," although it is fine over-head. The moon flashes out ever and anon, but the skipper prognosticates heavy rain so soon as the wind shall drop. It is an ugly time for even a sailor to pace the deck. The steamer groans and labours like one in heavy travail. Ships complain in their trouble with much vociferation, and almost shriek in their final agonies. They die as if invested with human attributes. When they perish silently, as in case of being waterlogged, &c., it is exactly like mortification setting in with man. They depart in a weird silence painful to witness.

But the sturdy steamer that we are at present warch-

ing holds her own bravely; she buries her nose in the waves with a grunt of defiance, albeit she cannot refrain from a cry of anguish as the angry waters crash heavily on her quarter, and come streaming over her decks in a flood of glittering spray. But she picks herself up gallantly, once more boldly faces her antagonists, and responds cheerfully to the dull thud and measured stroke of her powerful engines. If she herself makes moan about her voyage, we may safely conclude that there are dire cries of distress from the freight of humanity with which she is laden. Such have chiefly ceased now. The state of collapse has set in with most of these hapless victims. They are past proclamation of their sufferings, and would be content to be drowned forthwith; life, as at present constituted, offers but slight attraction. "Put me on shore or beneath the billow—anywhere, anything!—but rescue me from this accursed steamer!" Yet a few hours more and these despairing fragments of humanity shall be vociferous for ham, eggs, and buttered toast.

The traveller who, wrapped in thick pea-coat, and with travelling-cap drawn close over his brows, so determinedly kept the deck, was cause of marvel to the ship's officers. Once or twice they had respectfully recommended him to go below; but he curtly rejected the advice, and might be seen at times tumbling in the lee-scuppers, anon clinging to the weather-rigging, then again making a staggering effort to pace the quarter-deck, the last proceeding usually producing a repetition of the first. He was wet, drenched indeed, but seemed to heed it not; apparently he would do anything rather remain still—he was unquiet as the fabled Hebrew. His extreme restlessness attracted the attention of the skipper, who drew no favourable augury therefrom. He, the Captain, had carried across a felonious levanter or two in his time, and that excessive inquietude he deemed rather characteristic of the class. He foresaw a couple of detective officers greeting their arrival, and his unquiet passenger invested with a pair of handcuffs, some few minutes after they should come alongside the pier at Dover.

But he was wrong. That restless passenger is Reginald Holbourne, returning from Frankfort sick at heart—Reginald Holbourne so changed from the weak, vacillating man we saw leave Baker Street some months ago, that in character we shall have some difficulty in identifying him. For the last month Reginald has written letter after letter to Lettice, and received not a syllable in reply. In that month he has come to comprehend that this girl's love means to him everything. He is ready now to defy his father, Marion, or aught else in defence of that love, and reck little what the consequences may be. Fiercely had he chafed over his detention at Frankfort. But the business he had been sent upon was tedious in its details, and it was impossible for him to leave that city until the final arrangements were completed. What had happened to Lettice? Her last letter had told him of her grandfather's sudden death, and how she was left alone in the world. Since that, not a line has reached him. What can it all mean? Has she, too, been struck down by the destroyer? The thought makes his brain reel. But how otherwise explain her silence? That last letter overflowed with love and tenderness; what has paralysed the writer's pen. He is hurrying home, with the chill of impending evil striking heavy at his heart. No, he does not think, thank Heaven, that she is gone from this world. Her farewell message would have reached him ere this had it been so. He feels that Lettice would have whispered such with her dying lips into some friendly ear before death sealed them for ever. But some one has poisoned her mind against him. Her inexperience has been practised on. By whom? Who could possibly have an object in interfering between them? And once more Reginald dismisses this, as he has a score of other conjectures. Will this miserable steamer never reach Dover? Was there ever such a tub employed in the carriage of passengers? Did man ever encounter such accursed weather as it was his lot to meet with?

Thus did Reginald fret and fume during his transit across the tumultuous channel; but at last the tall

chalky cliffs are visible through the haze, and the grey old Castle can be faintly discerned when the moon glimmers out for a few minutes. That vexed passage is well-nigh over. Though the sea runs heavy round the Foreland, and the steamer groans dismally over her uncourteous reception, she shall rest at peace under shelter of the Admiralty pier in a little while now. With slowed engines, amidst incoherent shouts from porters and hotel touts, the steamer is warped alongside that colossal quay. The hand-railed plank is run quickly across her gangway, and all the confusion incidental to a disembarkation is immediately in full swing. With cadaverous countenance, and in a state of more or less prostration, the miserable passengers crawl from the dark cells that have witnessed their agonies, appear on deck, and feebly endeavour to claim their luggage, and indicate their wishes respecting it. Many feel that a couch without motion represents Elysium to them at present, and are borne off to the Lord Warden Hotel helpless and unresisting.

But Reginald is not of these; and having, after the use of much violent language, laid hands upon his baggage, he proceeds at once to the railway. He tries to sleep as the train whirls him towards London, but he is wet, cold, and wretched. Racked with the thoughts of what can have happened to Lettice: feverishly anxious to be once more in Baker Street. Sleep is not for such as he. The capricious god favours not those who woo him as a mere refuge from trouble and anxiety.

Have we not all experienced this?—when oblivion for awhile from grief or care would be so delicious; when we so crave for a few hours to lay down our burden and rest; when, worn with sorrow, harassed by the fierce and unsuccessful struggle with life, we thirst for a little to forget all and be at peace. Can we then ever sleep? Tired we may be, but our weary head tosses from side to side on our unquiet pillow, and we cry querulously, "Sleep is granted only to the happy!" To the miserable is meted out wakefulness, memory, and self-accusation. And in those open-eyed hours of the night what weird, ugly shapes those shortcomings of ours take upon

themselves—squandered time, squandered money, squandered opportunity, confront us like remorseless furies with their jeers and jibes of derision; tell us we are weak, purposeless, wanting in pith of character, and shall never more be of account in this world; that our chance has been and shall never come more. Bitter reflections are wont to gather round the sleepless pillow, and happy is he who can bear such enforced meditation with equanimity.

Reginald shared the usual fate of such anxious wooing of the poppy-crowned deity. He fell into a fitful dog-slumber some fifteen minutes before he reached Charing Cross, and woke with a shiver when called upon for his ticket. It was early morning as he threw himself into a cab, and drove rapidly to Baker Street. Small sign of vitality is as yet visible at his own domicile, but that troubles him little; he lets himself in with his pass-key, makes his way upstairs to his own rooms, enters, and throws open the shutters.

The first glance of unwedded man, on return to his peculiar stronghold after absence, is in search of correspondence. It may be with anxiety, with hope, with dread, with indifference, but his first look around the rooms of which he is master is for letters. Reginald, as may be readily supposed, was not likely to prove an exception to this rule. A small pile of these lay upon the writing-table. He runs his eye over the superscriptions in search of that one hand-writing which alone he so longs, yet half fears, to see, and throws them contemptuously down again. Lettice's delicate but somewhat irregular caligraphy is not among them. He gazes moodily out of the window, wonders whether the morning is yet far advanced enough to justify him in ringing his bell, in order that he may cross-examine Sarah concerning Miss Cheslett's health, &c. In pursuance of this latter train of thought, he turns and glances mechanically at the clock, and becomes aware that there is another letter still awaiting his attention. One glance at the handwriting suffices, and in another second he is absorbed in the perusal of Lettice's farewell. As he read, his face darkened; a light came into his eyes that

neither friend nor foe of Reginald Holbourne's had ever seen yet. With still lowering brow, he read it through a second time, and as he finished, a savage expletive escaped his lips.

"I'd give two years of my life," he muttered, "to know who 'they' may be upon this particular occasion. If 'they' happens to be anybody but my own father, there will be a heavy account to settle with me for this uncalled-for interposition. I begin to understand it all now. Accused of shame, poor child, through my criminal carelessness regarding her good name—pressure put upon her that her marriage with me would be my ruin—crushed and dispirited by her grandfather's death—there would be small difficulty in bending her to their will! She has, of course, left this, but I daresay the people here know pretty well where she has gone to. Lettice, my darling, I must have you unsay all that letter before the sun sets." And then once more Reginald relapsed into angry speculation as to who it was that could have seen and imparted all this knowledge to Lettice, and exacted a promise from her not to betray their name.

This puzzles Reginald amazingly. He had deemed his intimacy with Miss Cheslett unknown to any of his relations. True, he was not blind to the fact that many of his town acquaintances had cast most significant glances when they had encountered him walking with Lettice. His face flushes as he thinks how, in pursuance of his own selfish passion, he has allowed her fair fame to be suspected. But whatever they might think, what could justify them—what reason could they have for interfering? No, it was no acquaintance who had taken this extraordinary step, and of intimates Reginald had so few. Charlie Collingham was perhaps as great a chum as he had, but he and Charlie met but seldom; their paths in life were so very different. It was doubtful if Charlie had ever even heard of Lettice's existence.

But by this time the sun stands so high in the heavens that he has no further compunction about the disturbance of the house, and rings for Sarah accordingly. From that damsel he extracts the facts that a lady called upon Miss Lettice just after her grandfather's death—that

Miss Lettice seemed very much put out, and went away quite suddenly the next day but one, leaving a letter for him against the clock.

"Yes, he has got it. What was the lady like?"

But on this point Sarah becomes unreliable. She was a real lady, and beautifully dressed. No, she didn't see her face—at least hardly—the lady kept her veil down when she spoke to her. Was she fair or dark? She thought fair, but couldn't exactly say. She wasn't sure. Where had Miss Lettice gone? She didn't know—*missus* might know, but she didn't think she did.

Sarah proved right in her conjecture. The landlady was also in complete ignorance as to whither Lettice had departed. Reginald was much perturbed at this intelligence. He had deemed there would be no difficulty about ascertaining Miss Cheslett's new address, and would not believe at first that Lettice had disappeared and left no trace behind her. But further inquiry proved only too confirmatory of this. After considerable research, he at last discovered the cabman who had carried away Lettice, but that worthy could only impart that he had driven the lady to Farringdon Station. Reginald drove thither, but near a month had elapsed, and he could make nothing out of the cabmen or officials there. "A good many young ladies with luggage had come and gone—they were always coming and going," a misanthropical porter informed him, since the date he mentioned.

Sick at heart and sore distressed, Reginald drove back to his lodgings. He had grown wonderfully in earnest about this love of his, and a sullen determination never to abandon it now possessed him. In a hazy indefinite way he somehow coupled Marion with Lettice's disappearance. In very shadowy fashion as yet, but still that suspicion was germinating in his mind. Suddenly a thought struck him. He would go down and consult Charlie Collingham. Charlie was an adept in the occult mysteries of London, and could doubtless advise him how to prosecute his search for Lettice. Moreover, he felt impelled to make a confidant of some one. When our withers are sorely wrung, we mostly seek for sympathy from our kind. Neither man nor woman ever locks a

disastrous love affair altogether in his or her own breast. Reginald felt that it would be a relief to talk over matters with a friend, at any rate.

"Mr. Holbourne," exclaimed Polly, as she opened the door in answer to his ring. "Well, it's a blessing I'm sure to have somebody I do know call, instead of mysterious parties who want mutton-chops, or have fits and cry out for strange chemicals. Parties, too, who can't be identified on description, and whom Mr. Donaldson declares he knows nothing of, although they come on purpose to see him. Oh! yes, Mr. Collingham is in. Come up, please sir. Now, Mr. Donaldson," exclaimed Miss Meggott, as she threw open the door, "here's Mr. Holbourne. If you had not happened either of you to be at home, there's no saying what his requirements might have been, in this vale of mystery we live in."

The young men rose and welcomed Reginald cordially.

"Mr. Collingham!" exclaimed Polly, "perhaps you'd be kind enough to examine him closely. There's no knowing who is who now-a-days. If he's the Pirate of the Savannas, disguised as Mr. Holbourne, let me know; if he wants chops, or shows symptoms of fits, I'd best call in the police, I suppose, instantaneous. Fits especially," observed Miss Meggott, with lofty sarcasm, "we know to be a sure sign of imposture."

"Polly the betrayed, cease thou thy discordant prattle!" cried Collingham, in most melodramatic tones. "Hist, girl, the next inimical spy who would penetrate our castle's mystery will demand Welsh rarebits. 'Twas the witch of Bagdad told me. See thou emptiest the cayenne castor on the cheese when thou ministerest to his monstrous requirements."

"If I've more mysterious visitors to lunch, I'll mix ratsbane in their food," retorted Miss Meggott. "They'll be here for you to look at on your return, then, at all events."

"Peerless Dulcinea!" cried Donaldson, "forget not the words of the Saga, that the silken flattery of age is no more to be relied on than the fervent protestations of youth."

Miss Meggott deigned no reply, but made a *moue* at her tormentors and departed.

"Well, Reginald," said Collingham, "you don't often favour us with a visit. Been abroad, though, lately, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have been at Frankfort close upon two months. I hardly expected to find you. I thought both you and Donaldson were probably off for your Summer run."

"Jim is; lucky beggar, he's just on the verge of starting now. As for me, I've no chance of getting my neck out of the collar for the next month. 'God is great, and Plugson of Undershot is his prophet,' as Mr. Carlyle says; and I must stop and turn my ideas into dollars for a little longer yet."

"I came down to have a serious talk with you, Charlie. I want your advice and assistance."

"All right, old fellow. They are both very much at your service—especially the cheaper article. I give the public yards of it every month."

"I am off now, Holbourne," interrupted Donaldson, who had been hurriedly scribbling a note at the writing-table, "so you and Charlie can hold your palaver without interruption. Good-bye both of you!" And after shaking hands warmly with them, Jim took his departure.

"Now then," said Collingham, lighting a pipe, "let us hear an outline of the trouble, for I suppose it's grief of some kind. Men never want advice and assistance under other circumstances."

"Yes, something in that way, though not of a kind you are likely to imagine;" and then Reginald made a clean breast of it—told of his boyish engagement to Marion, how bitterly he had repented of it this long time, how Lettice had been thrown across his path, and how he had struggled against the attachment he had gradually conceived for her, how his love had proved too strong for his prudence, and how he had left for Frankfort, solemnly pledged to her.

"It's awkward," observed Charlie; "but that's not all, I can see. Go on."

Then Reginald narrated the sudden death of old Mr. Cheslett. His auditor gave a slight start at the name,

and dropped his pipe. How, upon his return, he found Lettice had disappeared. He told of her farewell letter, of the mysterious lady who had visited her, and wound up with a bitter denunciation of the officious "they" of Lettice's epistle, and a solemn declaration that nothing should induce him to give her up.

Collingham sat for some little time in silence after his companion had finished. At last he said,

"You have made your election for good, Reginald, between these two, eh?"

The latter nodded.

"Of course you are aware that you must behave badly to one of them. I need scarcely add that treason to Miss Langworthy, in the eyes of the world, will be by far the most heinous crime. I mention this as your adviser."

Once more Reginald nodded assent.

"And of course you mean to brave consequences, and adhere to your latter engagement?"

"I mean to marry Lettice, and no other," replied Holbourne, sententiously.

"It must have been Miss Langworthy who visited her," said Charlie, meditatively.

"Yes, I fancy so," said the other. "I have a strong suspicion she is 'they,' but no proof."

"Pretty fair presumptive evidence, though. You said your engagement to Miss Langworthy was a secret—that your father did not know of it. How many people do you suppose did?"

"I can't say," replied Reginald. "Let me think." After a short pause, he said, "To the best of my belief no one but my sister."

"Then, if you are right in that supposition, it could be only either Miss Langworthy or Miss Holbourne that came to Baker Street."

"True; but then how on earth did either of them know of my engagement to Lettice? That was known only to our two selves."

"Impossible to say, these things leak out in manner most mysterious."

"Exactly! Granted! But, you see, my first engage

ment was much more likely to become known than my second. The first extends over four years, and was contracted, and has gone on, under the eyes of a gossipin community who know me. The latter is an affair of a few weeks."

"Quite true; but, all the same, I have no doubt Miss Langworthy was the lady who visited your present inamorato in Baker Street," replied Charlie. "Your people were in London at the time, recollect. The next question is, what are you to do? My advice is, break with Miss Langworthy at once. You ought to get clear of that entanglement, to begin with. Secondly, we must discover Miss Cheslett. By-the-bye, you are quite sure that is her name?"

"Of course; she was never called anything else. But breaking with Marion is an awkward business. It must be done, but I don't quite know how to set about it." And Reginald looked anxiously at his friend, in hope of some suggestion on his part.

"Yes," replied Charlie, slowly, after a pause of some length. "Backing out of engagements generally is fraught with unpleasantness, more especially those matrimonial. It won't be a nice letter to write."

"It will be written, though, and that at once," returned Reginald sharply. "But how am I to discover Lettice?"

"Oh! you need not be uneasy on that point. Nobody can disappear in London for long from people who have made up their minds to find them. I know two or three men who would ascertain Miss Cheslett's whereabouts in the course of a few days. But, Reginald, you ought to have done with Miss Langworthy before you see Lettice again; and unless you pledge your word to that, I must decline to help you further in this matter. I have some idea I know more of poor old Cheslett and this girl than you dream of, and I will have no hand in bringing you together until all is over between you and Miss Langworthy."

Charlie spoke very seriously, almost solemnly, and Reginald raised his eyes in some astonishment at the gravity of his manner.

"You need not fear," he observed quietly. "You have taken a load from my mind in telling me that you have no doubt about discovering Lettice. As you say, it will not be a nice letter to write, but all will be finished between Marion and myself before the week is out."

He was not cognizant of Miss Langworthy's resources—that young lady permitted not such easy doffing of her silken fetters. She wove her nets of no cobweb material, and was little likely to tolerate so ready an escape from them.

"Well," said Reginald, rising, "I am very glad I've had this talk out with you. I was wretchedly hipped when I came; but you tell me you have no doubt about finding Lettice; and you mean it, Charlie, don't you?" And he eyed his companion keenly.

"Yes," said the other. "You do what you have said with regard to Miss Langworthy, and I will undertake that you are in possession of Miss Cheslett's address within a few days."

"Good night, and ten thousand thanks, old fellow," replied Reginald; and having interchanged a warm grasp of the hand with his friend, he took his departure.

Charlie remained staring vacantly into the empty grate for some time afterwards. Memory carried him back three or four years in his life, and a fair, laughing face once more looked up into his. Sadly he thought of those gay, joyous times when everything looked all so bright, and "the fairy birds were singing." His eyes were moist as he thought of the wreck and desolation that had come upon him so soon after. Then his mind wandered back to this affair of Reginald's, and Charlie rapidly arrived at the conclusion that it was a more complicated business than the delinquent dreamed of.

"It's likely to lead to a thundering row between him and his father for one thing. I can vouch personally for that not being an advantage to a man starting in life. Old Holbourne is not quite the sort of man to take kindly to a penniless daughter-in-law. In the next place, Miss Langworthy, as far as my knowledge of her goes—and though personally I know little of her, yet I have heard a good deal about her from Grace—is not likely to

stand being thrown over quietly. Reginald has a good deal stiffer work cut out for him than he thinks. However, he must fire the first shot before we can have any idea of what sort of storm it will raise; and crying off with Miss Langworthy is clearly the opening move of the game. Reginald, my boy, my advice and talents are at your disposal, and I wish you well through it; but I think it's likely to be roughish weather with you shortly."





CHAPTER XXVI.

DELICATE CORRESPONDENCE.

MR. HOLBOURNE, to his intense delight, was once more back at Aldringham. He described London as much too densely populated for comfort, and as pervaded by that terrible democratic spirit which would make any place unbearable. "In the days of my youth," says Mr. Holbourne, with considerable action of the double gold eye-glass, "the metropolis was pleasant enough for a few weeks. You generally ran across a good many old friends, and managed to see something of them; you heard of others, hunted them up, and they were glad to see you. Now it is simply chaos—a fermenting mass of humanity, all struggling to get uppermost. Whether people are pursuing business or pleasure, ambition or knavery, they all do it with such vehemence in these days that they have no time to stop and talk over old times." And then Mr. Holbourne indulged in some well-rounded observations about the levelling spirit that was abroad, and the want of respect to their superiors vouchsafed by the lower-class Londoners. Perhaps the memory of those impudent street-boys, and that vulgar and irreverent cabman, still rankled in his breast.

Miss Langworthy also was well satisfied to be back again. She had not been favourably impressed with London, as it presented itself to her from the furnished

apartments point of view. True that they had been in possession of most excellent rooms, and in a good locality, but Marion was a young lady who craved to keep pace with the upper circles wheresoever her lot might be cast. She came to the quick conclusion that it was no use being in London unless you had a house and a carriage; and if not an opera-box, at all events license to run a tolerably heavy bill at Mitchell's. As these had not entered into her uncle's programme, she also was well content to find herself once more at Aldringham, where she enjoyed the former advantages, and was of the elect of the neighbourhood.

Miss Langworthy of late had been troubled with some misgivings as to whether her scheming propensities had not led her rather too far. She was troubled with no compunctions—on the contrary, she felt that to deal out fitting punishment to Reginald for his lack of loyalty to herself, and retribution to Grace for what Marion deemed, however unjustly, her treachery in the matter of Robert Collingham, was not a whit more than they deserved; but Miss Langworthy began to have a suspicion that her later manœuvres might recoil upon her own head. She almost wished that she had never taken Mr. Lightfoot into her counsels, and saw that the time might come when that unscrupulous adventurer might prove troublesome. He was that, indeed, to some extent even now; his demands for money in prosecution of her last instructions being considerably in excess of what she had contemplated when she had given him that commission in Kensington Gardens.

Marion had been a schemer from her cradle — she was a born *intrigante*. As a child she had never sought to attain her aim except in an indirect manner. The passion had grown with her growth—strengthened with her strength. From the days when she had so cleverly ousted her uncle's old servants, she had made rapid strides. It was her passion. She was continually plotting, intriguing, in her domestic circle. It was not that she particularly cared, perhaps, for the object in view, it was the sheer love of out-manœuvring some other person. It was but natural that she should grow bolder in her artifices as

she saw her designs so constantly crowned with success. She was quite aware that her assumption of the rôle of martyrdom had caused considerable discomfort both to Grace and her uncle—she meant that it should. Everybody concerned deserved punishment for Robert Collingham's misconduct, and it was well for the delinquent himself that he was beyond Miss Langworthy's reach. Marion had given his case deep consideration but had failed, as yet, to strike out any method of avenging herself—else she felt that she could have prosecuted such design with much energy.

She dwelt with great satisfaction on her interview with poor Lettice. She considered the promise, that she had extracted from her at the commencement of their conversation, as a stroke of superior diplomacy; and, from what she had seen of the girl, she felt pretty confident that she would keep her word. That Lettice had left Baker Street she had easily ascertained through the agency of Mr. Lightfoot, who, calling there upon some frivolous pretext, at her desire, had assured himself of that fact. Miss Langworthy, in short rather plumed herself upon the dexterity with which she had managed the matter. She had relegated her rival to obscurity, without giving Reginald a hint even that she was aware of his defection. She quite purrs over the success of her schemes, and if Mr. Lightfoot would only enable her to drop the bitter intelligence of Charlie Collingham's marriage into her cousin's cup of happiness, Marion feels that her Summer will not have been spent in vain.

She is very obstinate as regards her theory of Charlie's quarrel with his father. She holds that he made a disgraceful marriage—entrapped into it probably—and that, though now separated from his wife, yet that there is a shameless woman somewhere with a right to that title. Marion has no evidence on which to justify this opinion. Here and there she can certainly point to circumstances which give some colour to her story, but the filling in of this most meagre outline is due entirely to Miss Langworthy's lively imagination; yet she has not hesitated to circulate this scandal, bit by bit, through Aldringham. She is not wont to hesitate at the dissemination of such

gossip as may serve her turn, and Miss Langworthy is continually distilling insidious and dubious stories into Aldringham's avid ears, in furtherance of some pet project of her scheming brain.

Marion has been slightly taken aback this morning by the receipt of a letter from Reginald. It is not so much the actual contents that disturb her, but there is an assertion of independence pervading the whole epistle which she has never encountered in any previous effusion of his. He writes to sever their engagement. That Miss Langworthy has been prepared for any time the last twelve months. So little does she value his plighted troth that, had there been no Lettice in the case, it was odds but that she had let him go in peace. But Marion has not the slightest idea of granting him his liberty, in order that he may affiance himself to some one else. No! she has, she trusts, in fact his letter admits as much, frightened this new attraction far enough away to prevent any immediate meeting between them. Six months hence, if she can ascertain that he has still failed to discover Lettice, well, then, perhaps she may release him, but it is little likely that she, Miss Langworthy, is quietly to submit to affront, so that he may be blest with the love of another.

Marion gives a scornful toss of her head, and her lip curls as she once more glances over Reginald's letter.

"He means," she murmured, "to be very conclusive, and thinks this is so, no doubt. I don't know that I ever saw a much weaker production. It contains an exhibition of temper, and an assertion that he can't substantiate; but, with all its weakness, there is an air of dogged determination all through it to have done with me. That is nothing now. It is a mere consequence of the greater slight put upon me when he presumed to place that girl before me in his thoughts. As far as she is concerned," continued Marion, with a scornful smile, "I think I have had some satisfaction. I flatter myself I somewhat dissipated that minx's day dream."

Once more she looks at the letter. "That our engagement has been a mistake, Marion," wrote Reginald, "has been as patent to you as to me for some time past.

It has been visible when we met, transparent in our correspondence this year or more. An error of our teens, that has been allowed to continue, from want of moral courage on my part, certainly ; most likely from a similar feeling on yours. Let it end. We are unsuited to each other in every respect. With my, at present, uncertain prospects, it can be no loss to you to terminate it forthwith. I would have added, let us continue friends, but after the outrage you have thought fit to put upon an innocent girl on my account, that is no longer possible. What fiend prompted you to come here and insult a helpless girl in her sorrow ?—to attribute both to her and me wrong-doing which you should have been the last to believe in ?—to hunt a girl, still stricken with the recent loss of her sole protector, from the only roof under which she could look for friends and assistance ? Why do I constitute myself her champion ? you will ask. Who has better right than her affianced husband to hurl back the base stigma you have sought to inflict upon her ? I had lain at your mercy but for this. False as I have been to my promises to you, I must have craved release from your hands, with abject apology for the wrong I had done you. But you have made my task easy when you cast such shame upon Lettice Cheslett and myself. I no longer ask to be set free—I throw off the chains of my own accord, and hold myself justified by your own conduct. It was unwomanly, heartless, unfeeling on your part. Had you poured forth your wrath upon my head, it had been just, and I should have bowed meekly to your reproaches ; but you have reviled and insulted one whose youth and recent sorrow alone should have placed her above attack, let alone that the scandalous representation which reached your ears should have been held unworthy of credit in your sight.

“Further correspondence between us is, of course, useless. In time I may feel this less, and trust, for the sake of what has passed between us—in memory of what we once were to one another—that I shall some day be able to say that I forgive you.”

That letter had cost Reginald some trouble. Had it

not been for his great wrath, it would have cost him still more : but he did flatter himself, when it was posted, that he had thoroughly broken with Marion. As I have said before, he did not quite know Miss Langworthy.

Marion mused for some time over this epistle. "Yes," she said gently at last, "I shall answer it, and that, Reginald, is a thing I have no doubt you don't expect. I shall deny the whole of the charges against me, and that, O thou false love of mine, is a contingency which has never occurred to your imagination. I think, when you get my reply, you will feel a wee bit bewildered. Now, the question is, how much does he really know, and how much is conjecture ? That girl could not have told him my name, because she did not know it. She went away, and from his letter it is pretty evident that he has not yet discovered her retreat. Of course she left a written good-bye behind her, and it is clear in that she informed him of some of the wholesome truths I thought fit to communicate to her. I wish I knew how much she told him exactly. Still it doesn't signify a great deal. I can guess pretty nearly what his actual information amounts to, and how much of this"—and she tapped the letter in her lap—"is conjecture. The story I shall write him will hold good, whatever he may think of it, until he meets that girl again. I think I must write to Lightfoot, to make out where she has gone to. I am paying him pretty heavily just now for the gratification of avenging myself upon Grace, and her milk-and-water manœuvring. He may as well ascertain this point also for me. That he and this Cheslett chit will meet again, I fear, is too probable ; but if I can delay it I will. With all her innocence, she will never resist putting the clue to her whereabouts into his hands eventually—just the sort of girl to fancy herself dying, and having sent for him to wish her good-bye for ever, then recover from that moment."

Miss Langworthy fell into the common mistake of all those who play with packed cards. Schemer herself, she never could believe but that those around her were also having resort to much under-play and *finesse*.

Marion glances out of the window across the glowing

parterre to where Gracie, draped in diaphanous robes, and looking the incarnation of indolence, sits absorbed in her book. The fact that one of the objects of her spleen is apparently so little affected by her machinations rather stirs Miss Langworthy's bile, and confirms her intention of making things as unpleasant as possible to the victim within her toils. Yet that she has cost Grace some unhappy hours she is well aware, and it is with no feeling of penitence that she recalls such circumstance to her memory. Marion's mind is warped on this point. The disappointment to her hopes and the shock to her vanity occasioned by Robert Collingham's preference of her cousin, when she had deemed him encompassed by her own charms, she could neither forget nor forgive. Nor would it have been possible to disabuse her mind of the idea that Grace had deliberately contested the winning of Robert Collingham's love with her from the sheer spirit of coquetry, or to amuse herself, or to test her power, or from caprice, or anything else you may choose to mention. Marion was aware that she herself could have derived much enjoyment from such exercise of her faculties, and was supremely incredulous of Grace's victory being as unsought as unexpected.

She rises, and walking to the writing-table, takes pen and paper and proceeds to answer Reginald's angry epistle. That the soft answer turneth away wrath we have Scripture for believing, and of a surety when the wrath is poured on best Bath post, there can be little doubt of the difficulty an irritated mortal will have in establishing a quarrel with a correspondent determined to avoid it. But it seems to be a law of quarrelling on paper that both sides should display the most captious acerbity; and under these circumstances commend me to it for the production of a feud past healing, for the hatching of a vendetta that shall terminate only in the grave. The word spoken may fade from the memory in time, but when the biting sentences are placed on paper we can always feed the furnace of our wrath by recurring to such passages. And I have observed that men always keep the whole of an angry correspondence, and are neither reticent of discussing the question nor slow to

refer to it, turning to it, one may say, upon very slight provocation.

Marion's pen glides rapidly across the paper. Her letter costs her far less thought in its composition than the one which provokes it had cost her lover.

"Dearest Reginald," she writes, "your note is an enigma, which I must at all events trouble you further to explain. If our engagement is the mistake which you seem so suddenly to have discovered, you will excuse my observing that you have till this given me no reason to suspect so. Neither by letter, nor word of mouth when we met, have you indicated that you were weary of my love, that you would fain be free from the tie that bound us to each other. What have I done that you should, with such undisguised brutality, inform me that you are affianced to another? Who is this woman that has bereft me of your affection? Upon what plea do you dare, casting honour to the winds, to so violate your troth to me? Did I not, when I found myself comparatively penniless, at once release you from your engagement? Did you not voluntarily renew the vows which you had before made to me? Who, I ask once more, is this woman that has come between us? Has she taken advantage of your infatuation to persuade you that I insulted her? Is it likely that I should visit your rooms at any time? Is it probable that I should do so knowing you to be abroad? Insult there might be should we meet; but I at all events should consider myself the victim of such insolence if this person proclaimed herself your betrothed.

"You say you throw off the chains and free yourself. You cannot. Such calumny of the woman you have professed to love, such a total repudiation of every sense of honour and justice, loads you with fetters you shall bear to your dying day. I will not, cannot restore your troth to you, as things are at present. To release you now, would be to acknowledge the truth of your wild accusations, to acquiesce in the blackening of my own character. Do not think that I wish to compel you to an unwilling fulfilment of our engagement, but that engagement I will have acknowledged and ruptured in

the face of the world. It is the only atonement you can make for the vile scandal that your hand has penned.

"I never dreamed that I should weep over letter of yours. I little thought that my hand would ever write such lines as these to you. Has that woman so maddened you, Reginald, that you can have no pity for her who has loved you from your youth up?—who has sympathized with all your aspirations, and dropped tears over your disappointments? It would seem so. Your letter is not only merciless, but brutal. I had bowed meekly, though sorrowfully, to your decision had it been otherwise conveyed; but my honour is at stake, and in defence of that it becomes my duty to insist that our engagement be publicly acknowledged, as a preliminary to its dissolution. Good-bye, Reginald. You have treated me cruelly, but I can forgive you. While under that woman's thrall you are no longer yourself. That you may never experience the bitter sorrow that wedding her will entail upon you, is the sincere hope of one who even yet cannot refrain from signing herself

"Your own

"MARION."

Miss Langworthy read her composition over with much satisfaction.

"I think that will do," she murmured at last. "It will be a lesson to him, at all events, that the dissolution of an engagement is not to be achieved by simply dropping a letter into the nearest pillar-box the minute you discover a face that proves more attractive than your *fiancée's*. What he can see in that chit of a child I can't imagine. A pretty face certainly, but she has no style, no manner. He will probably weary of her in a month. It is in strict accordance, however, with the foolishness of men, who are wont to deem a face will last a lifetime, instead of looking for the more durable endowments of money, brains, or connection."

Marion's composition did her infinite credit, from one point of view. As a specimen of veracity, it was perhaps rather a failure. But the high tone that she took

with regard to her assailed character, and the dexterous manner in which she implied that she had never visited Reginald's rooms, without explicitly denying it, was certainly artistic. The persistent way in which she spoke of the girlish Lettice as a woman, thereby ingeniously insinuating that it was impossible she could have seen her, or she would not have so described her, was also clever. Her intimation that their engagement must be first publicly acknowledged before it could be dissolved, would, she knew, place Reginald in an awkward position; and her final burst of tenderness she calculated would further embarrass him.

As she herself had expressed it, he would awake to the fact that a matrimonial engagement could not be broken through at the mere cost of a sheet of note-paper and a penny stamp.





CHAPTER XXVII

ON THE TRAIL.

IN a very plainly-furnished room in Scotland-yard are two men, engaged in earnest conversation. The upholstery of the apartment is of what might be denominated the early Spartan period, and consists of a massive table, three or four Windsor chairs, a heavy office-inkstand, a blotting-pad, and an empty coal-scuttle.

"It's curious," continued Mr. Bullock, who had evidently been expatiating at some length. "very curious, that this young lady should, whether by accident or design, have so completely vanished. Still I have not had time to work the case out as yet. I bore in mind what you told me, that the gentleman you are acting for had lost the trail at Farringdon Station. But I generally, on these occasions, like to reckon up things myself, and so I took the liberty of looking up the cabman that drove her there. Now, though I got no additional clue as to what had become of the young lady, I picked up one rather singular circumstance, and that is, we are not the only people trying to trace Miss Cheslett."

"You are not thinking of Mr. Holbourne's own efforts in that way, are you!" said Collingham, who was sitting on the table.

"No, sir, no," retorted Mr. Bullock, with a con-

temptuous smile. "The party as made these inquiries was only about a couple of hours ahead of me in his investigations. I imagine that he has come to a dead stop at Farringdon Street, like myself. We shall probably meet when I pick up the trail again. From what the cabman said, he is evidently a workman. 'Blessed,' says he, 'if you ain't a asking me question for question just what the t'other chap, who was here a couple of hours or so ago, did. Why didn't you come together, and save me all this wear and tear of intelleck?' 'Perhap,' said I, 'we wanted to hear if you always told the same tale. Perhaps we wanted to present you with five shillings twice instead of once.' He winked pleasantly at this. 'I tumble, governor,' he remarked. 'I'm good to tell it, at five bob a sitting, from now to next Derby-day. You can put me through as often as you like, but you needn't be afeard but what I shall come out all right in the box!?'"

"What the deuce did he mean by that?" inquired Charlie.

"Why, he thought we wanted his evidence in a court of law, and that we were testing him severely, to make certain that he would not break down."

"Well what do you propose to do next?" inquired Collingham.

"Why, we must have an advertisement or two in the papers, to give the young lady a chance of discovering herself, if she will, for one thing. And the wording of of those I shall leave to you and Mr. Holbourne. No necessity to mention names, you understand. I should like to see them before they're inserted. In the next place, I must have a regular overhaul of all the cabmen who work about that station. I can give a very much more accurate description of how the young lady was dressed than Mr. Holbourne could, what her luggage was like, &c. I have found out all that, and I am much more likely to get what I want out of those chaps than he was. What makes the difficulty about tracing her is the time that has elapsed before we set about it."

"Very good, Bullock," replied Charlie, as he dropped hisurely off the table. "There's no more to be said at

present. I'll get Holbourne to make out the sort of advertisement you want, and leave it here for you. Don't lose time about the thing, that's all."

"Trust me for that, sir. As soon as I hit off the scent at all, I'll let you know." And Mr. Bullock, having politely seen Collingham to the door, wished him good day.

As Charlie wended his way home across St. James's Park, the boast of Mr. Lightfoot suddenly occurred to him. That worthy upon one occasion had declared to Donaldson that he would always back himself against the London detectives in the obtaining of information upon any subject. It was true he had coupled it with the contemptuous rider that they were not to have the opportunity of muddying the stream before he commenced his investigations. Reginald was very much in earnest, and Bullock so far had made but little progress. Two strings to one's bow was not bad policy. Would it be worth while to communicate with this brazened adventurer? He didn't know where Mr. Lightfoot resided, it was true, but that gentleman he regarded as perfectly conversant with where he and Donaldson had their abode. Was he not the supposed epicure who had found fault with their chops, and traduced their sherry? A man of that sort always studied the advertisements of the papers, and it would be easy to communicate with him through their columns. He would ask Reginald what he thought about it.

A very weak conclusion this of Charlie's. As if Reginald Holbourne was a sane and sober man to consult on this occasion—a Colin who made but the one wail, "Shepherds, I have lost my love;" and who would have repelled with fiercest disdain the mocking rejoinder of the cynics—"O rest, child of fortune, and be thankful that much anguish and heart-burning has therefore been spared thee." But Charlie was a sufferer from the same complaint, and had all that fellow-feeling which makes us wondrous kind. Reginald would naturally urge the employment of half London in the discovery of Lettice's whereabouts, and was scarce likely not to be an advocate for the retention of Mr. Lightfoot's services.

Charlie had not been at home long before Miss Meggott announced Mr. Holbourne, in that airy manner that constituted her principal characteristic.

"You will do him good, sir," she said—"he wants a little rousing. His work in the *Misanthrope* is sadly wanting in pepper since Mr. Donaldson left. There was a time when I had great hopes he might be prosecuted for libel, but he's grown tame, dreadfully tame—chickens is nothing to it."

"Polly, my dear, since that elderly party persuaded you there was no such thing now-a-days as 'a heart for falsehood framed,' you've grown sadly satirical. That hoary trifter with a maiden's affections, who simulated convulsions of the lungs when he should have proffered his hand, has much to answer for."

"You have never had proof that he was an imposter, after all," retorted Miss Meggott, sharply. She was a little sore on this subject.

"Proof!" said Charlie, with intense solemnity. "Has he not vanished into thin air? Poor blighted flower, that should have knelt at the altar with him, hast thou——"

But here Miss Meggott, with some smothered allusion to "blighted grandmothers," slammed the door and disappeared.

"Well, Reginald," continued Charlie, "I thought you would drop in this evening, although you cannot expect that I have any intelligence for you as yet. I saw Bullock this afternoon, but, of course, he's carried the case no further yet than Farringdon Street; but I've no doubt he will have news for you in a few days."

"No," returned the latter, wearily, as he dropped his head upon his hands; "I hardly expected you would have anything to tell me, though I have to tell you. I fulfilled my promise, and wrote to break decidedly with Marion. It is not quite so easy as I thought it."

Charlie said nothing. It had been his opinion from the first that Miss Langworthy would prove cunning of fence, and a lady little likely to submit to being thrown over passively. It would have puzzled him, perhaps, to give reason why, but he most assuredly reckoned Marion a clever and unscrupulous woman.

"She denies that visit to my rooms, *in toto*," said Reginald, after a pause.

"Good heavens! you don't mean to say you were rash enough to accuse her of that, with no positive proof to go on?" cried Charlie, aghast.

"Yes, I did, and told her pretty strongly what I thought of her treatment of Lettice, to boot," returned his companion, doggedly.

"My dear fellow, a woman who acted in that way would be just as certain to deny it as that we are sitting here. It was foolish of you, Reginald—excuse my saying so—to allude to the circumstance."

"I thought otherwise, and so do still. I had it all out at once, and told her I was going to marry Lettice, besides."

"You're grit, and no mistake!" replied Charlie, with some admiration—"but what's the gist of her letter?"

"Oh, she insists on a public declaration of our engagement, previous to breaking it off—of course, that's only to make things as unpleasant as possible for me. I don't mind that, if she had only kept to that style of argument I shouldn't care; but she winds up with a pathetic appeal, which is awkward. You see, Charlie, I know I'm not behaving well to her, whatever she may have done. Of course, Lettice had no business ever to have been anything to me, and then what I deem Marion's great wrongdoing could not have taken place."

"You'll be good enough to recollect that I pointed out to you, when you first consulted me about the complication, that you were bound to behave badly to one or the other, and that it was for you to elect which."

Charlie spoke with a tinge of bitterness, for his sympathies were with Lettice, and he did not like the signs of what seemed to him a re-action in Marion's favour.

"I know all that," replied the other, quietly. "I have no intention of departing from the decision that I then came to. But it makes matters harder for me to put straight, all the same."

"She showed little mercy to her rival," retorted Charlie, sharply; "which may, in some sort, excuse your conduct."

"And yet you said just now I was a fool to have pleaded that in extenuation. I thought it, in some measure, justified the badness of my case."

"Ah, well!" exclaimed Charlie, "you must struggle through this the best way you can. I decline to advise you further."

"I don't much think you could. It's one of those difficulties that a man has to fight his way out of single-handed. I thought that first letter an awkward one to write, but it strikes me this next is still more unpleasant."

"Stop!" cried Charlie—"I have a bit of advice for you. If this next letter fails to terminate things between you and Miss Langworthy, then tell your sister the whole story, and see what she says about it."

"What good would that do?" said Reginald, with an inquisitive stare at his counsellor.

"How can I tell! Try it, and see what comes of it? It can't do any harm, at all events."

Reginald gazed keenly at his companion for a few seconds, and then said slowly.

"You think highly of Gracie—are you in love with her?"

Collingham's temples flushed for a moment, and then, in steady, resolute tones, he replied—

"Yes, and she has promised to marry me. Won't you welcome me as a brother-in-law?"

"That I will, with all my heart!" returned Holbourne, as he clasped the other's hand warmly. "What a beetle I have been! Of course, that's why you dragged me down to that Aldringham ball?"

"Yes. It was worth all the journey, as far as I was concerned."

"What an everlasting humbug you are, Charlie. I thought all the time you meant attempting reconciliation with your father."

"Not very successful about that, was I?" cried Charlie. "That will come, though. It's Grace's mission to mend that quarrel, though I have never told her so, and you must say nothing about it as yet."

"I am mute as a dormouse in Winter-time; and now I'm off to indite that dreaded letter. It's all very well,

Charlie, but when a girl you can't help feeling that you are behaving badly to falls back upon the bygone days——”

“You had better become ice and granite,” interrupted Collingham, hastily, “if you ever mean to break the engagement off.”

“Yes—I suppose you are right.” said the other, as he sought his hat.

“Oh! by the way, Reginald, there's one thing I wanted to ask you. A brace of setters cover more ground than one, and though Bullock is doing his best to discover Miss Cheslett, there's another fellow I know, who is not in the force, but who, I fancy, is clever at commissions of this kind. Should you like him employed also?”

“Look here, Charlie,” replied Holbourne, “I'll spend every guinea I have—every shilling I can raise—to discover Lettice. I take it, the more lavish I am of money, the sooner I am likely to hear of her. You understand this work better than I do, but you can scarce befriend me worse, remember, than grudging expense now.”

“Good!” replied Collingham, sententiously. “I think, then, I shall set a second sleuth-hound to work.”

“Thanks; and now, good night.”

“He is very much in earnest this time,” mused Charlie, as he listened to his visitor's departing footsteps. “He is wonderfully changed from the listless, vacillating, uncertain fellow that he was a few months back. This new love of his seems to have made a man of him. I thought Miss Langworthy was of a kind that scarce bear the snapping of their chains so lightly. That woman will cost Reginald trouble yet. Before this new-born energy was fused into him he could no more have cast off her shackles than flown. There is a great opportunity for him, on that very account. She will not comprehend the change in his character—will be too confident of the old sway that she exercised over him so long—will rely too much upon the weakness of his nature. Yes, he has a great pull over her there. It's like playing at *écarté* with your king masked, and as we all know there is one stage in the game when that is likely to tell. Reginald

is exactly in that position just now as regards Miss Langworthy. May it stand him in good stead!"

The graziers of Romney Marsh would tell you that, in estimating the percentage of loss upon their flocks, they always allow so much for the "jump shorts." Their pastures are divided, not by fences, but by ditches, broad, deep, and steep in the bank. Among the sheep that they turn out to feed upon the fat meadow land, there is always a small proportion of adventurous "muttons," who, instead of pursuing their proper vocation of sleeping, grazing, and growing fat, persist in desiring change and novelty. It is obvious that to obtain this they must jump these ugly ditches, and a good many perish annually from an ambition that unfortunately has anything but o'erleapt itself. Such are denominated "jump shorts."

In the great human flock you constantly encounter some of these "jump shorts." They only perish socially, it is true, but what lots of men one could place one's finger upon, of whom great things were predicted, but who somehow never quite cleared mediocrity's ditch. They failed, and you said, "Oh! wait yet another time." But that other time came, and again they appeared with a blare of trumpets, and flopped plump into the middle of mediocrity's muddy waters.

Now Reginald Holbourne was just one of these men. At college all his contemporaries had argued that he would distinguish himself both in learning and athletics; but he took a very moderate degree, and never attained a place in the University eleven. He certainly for one season pulled in his college eight, and showed such good form that a great rowing career was predicted for him; but next season saw him drafted. He was too indolent to persevere with that, as with other things. He would take anything up hotly for a period, and develop great promise therein, be it classics or cricket, rowing or history; but he had no perseverance, and had so far been a decided "jump short."





CHAPTER XXVIII.

SCANDAL RUNS HIGH.

SCANDAL is a plant that thrives in most places. It grows and flourishes amid the busy hum of cities; it does very fairly in distant colonies; will crop up and obtain reasonable size in an Australian out-station; but to develop it in its most luxuriant form no soil can compare with that of a country town. There it runs riot, spreading with the rapidity of a pumpkin-vine, fastening its tendrils round young and old. If you doubt the truth of my assertion, remain passive in your scepticism, but I recommend you not to attempt proving my theory a fallacy. In a provincial town observance of your neighbours' affairs is the salt of existence. Life's river flows slowly through those unpeopled streets; society is rather put to it for matter of conversation. There is much piquancy given to the talk that is spiced by the relation of some fellow-citizen's shortcomings, and when you can transform shortcomings into wrong-doings, discourse concerning them is flavoured with much pungency. Mrs. Smythson Smith, unable to settle her account with the milliner, is a source of much gratification and innocent enjoyment; but Mrs. Smythson Smith suspected of illicit flirtation is a topic that sets the town agog.

Aldringham has been much exercised in this way of late. Thanks to the delicate hands that manipulate the

greedy ear of that town, there are very few crimes now that it is not prepared to hold Charlie Collingham guilty of. "They say," and "I'm told," preface various stories that are whispered to his disadvantage, albeit who says or who it is that tells is a point the avid recipients of such hints and historiettes never trouble themselves to inquire. He has married such woman as no man should give his name to; he has committed bigamy; he is about to commit it; his wife has separated from him in consequence of his ill-treatment; he has forged his father's name—in short, scandal ran breast-high against Charlie Collingham at Aldringham at present. Evidence that libellous little town never stopped to inquire for; "they say," and "I'm told" quite sufficed it to build its malevolent ideas of Charlie's wrong-doings upon.

The victim of all these rumours lived his steady London life in blissful ignorance of what wild work they were making with his name in his own country. But Grace's ears were stung sharply at times. She bore these stories bravely and in silence; further, she abstained from mentioning them in her letters to him.

"What matter," she said to herself, "what these scandal-mongers say for a little while longer? A few months and Charlie shall claim me, and scatter such infamous fables to the winds. I can wait and trust. It is hard to have to listen to such vile falsehoods, but it would only harass him to tell him of them."

She was a proud girl, Grace. Once or twice the foul libels on her lover had wounded her past endurance, and she had flamed forth in his defence; but the curious eyes and incredulous ears which had greeted her taking up the cudgels in his behalf had warned her against further complication of her troubles.

It was well she so speedily took the hint, for Aldringham was quite prepared to give credence to a report that she also had fallen a victim to Charlie Collingham's manifold wickedness—that he had wooed, won her affections, and then left her to weep over such rash parting with her heart. But Grace, fortunately, was advised in time, and dropped the open championship of her lover.

Current as all these stories are in Aldringham, yet **no**

word of them ever reaches Sir John's ear. Few people have the hardihood to speak to the Baronet of his youngest son. He has so publicly renounced him, so ostentatiously proclaimed the severance of all tie between them, so studiously avoided the slightest reference to him since their quarrel, that it is scarce likely to be a topic that any one of his friends would like to touch upon—more especially with such unpalatable tidings as it would be their lot to convey to him at present. Mr. Holbourne, it is true, has once or twice thought it might be as well that he should let Sir John know of the rumours rife in Aldringham about Charlie; but somehow his heart failed him when it came to the point, and he shrank from risking a probable rebuff from the stern old Baronet.

Miss Langworthy pursues the even tenor of her way calmly and relentlessly. She is still bent on avenging herself upon Grace, her uncle, and Reginald. But Marion is troubled at times with sore misgivings. Her scheming is becoming more complicated than she considers judicious; and then again, beyond gratifying her malice, what is to come of it all? She reflects a good deal upon this, and at times half regrets that she has so thrown away her time and money—for Mr. Lightfoot has of late become more pressing in his applications. It is true she may succeed in severing Reginald from Lettice—in breaking off Grace's suspected engagement with Charlie Collingham. There will be some private satisfaction to be derived from the attainment of these objects; but beyond that there will accrue small benefit to Marion Langworthy. She hardly desires to wed Reginald now, even if such marriage was at her option. What is it that she wants? Marion knows what it is that she desires well enough—wealth and position! But this gratification of the malice provoked by her wounded vanity will contribute not a whit to the main object of her life. Then Miss Langworthy's thoughts revert to Robert Collingham, and she meditates whether it is not possible to solace him for Grace's refusal. She so seldom sees him now, or else Marion thinks that his subjection is still not beyond her capability.

Mr. Holbourne's temper, meanwhile, which is by nature of the easiest, has become somewhat touchy under his niece's manipulation. The trip to London had to a great extent put a stop to the want of harmony so manifest of late amid his Lares and Penates. But now they are once more settled at Aldringham, discord is again rife within his home. The banker frets and fumes over the petty *désagréments* which mark his daily life. The more so that, as far as he can understand the cause of these little vexations, they are entirely attributable to the whims and caprices of his own daughter. Mr. Holbourne is very fond of Grace in his way, but has arrived at a time of life when man bears interference with his habits and customs with scant toleration. Moreover, his vanity has received two or three slight blows of late, and to a man of the banker's character that is a source of much irritation. If there was one thing Mr. Holbourne piqued himself upon next to his oratory, it was his dinners. The last two or three had turned out signal failures. He was not at all aware how much these entertainments had owed their success to his niece. But so it was. Marion was as clever at mixing the social element within her reach as she was in devising a *menu*. She knew exactly what people would blend pleasantly together, and possessed the rare art of mingling them with as much dexterity and nicety as is displayed by the artistic salad-maker. It may easily be imagined that now Miss Langworthy had assumed the rôle of a domestic Nemesis, there was small difficulty to a lady of her talents in mixing discordant ingredients in these dinners.

She would ask Grace, in the most careless way, if she did not think that the Traceys ought to be bidden to the feast. Miss Holbourne would probably reply: "Yes, anyone you choose." When it was palpable that the Traceys, or whoever it might be, failed utterly to amalgamate with the remainder of the guests, and threw an unmistakable wet blanket over the whole entertainment (and trust Marion to make that appear clear and visible to the observant eye), then Miss Langworthy, talking over it afterwards, would say deprecatingly,

"It was those dreadful Traceys, uncle—they would kill any party. I can't thing what Grace wanted them asked for."

Grace was quite conscious of her cousin's malevolent influence over her home, but she felt herself powerless to counteract Marion's machinations. Although aware of them in the abstract, she failed to penetrate the crafty details which involves such sore discomfort to her father and herself. A species of armed truce subsisted at this time between her and Marion, in which Miss Holbourne felt she was being gradually worsted, and that open war between them would be infinitely more to her advantage; but Miss Langworthy took care to give no pretext for a quarrel. Grace's only pleasant days at those times were those she passed with Sylla at Churton.

It is a glorious August afternoon. The corn, though for the most part cut, is as yet far from gathered. The stooks of golden grain stand piled about the fields. The creaking of the carts and waggons, and the shrill whirr of the reaping machine, break the solemn stillness that so often inaugurates the birth of the Autumn. Faint sounds of laughter are now and again wafted from the distant fields, but the toil is too earnest to leave room for much of that. When the eye of the farmer is continually bent on the barometer, his men are called upon for exertions that leave but short time for laughter. Harvest, in these days of high farming, means the highest possible strain, put upon every man, woman, child, and horse connected with the holding. Extra wages, extra food, extra beer, but the minimum of rest that nature will be contented with, till the corn is all housed. I do not mean that the labour is not given with a will, but that the tension is too severe to leave much time or inclination for laughter. I fancy there is little mirth in a university eight during that dour struggle from Putney to Mortlake. If those rollicking boisterous harvests that we read of ever did exist except upon paper, then I can only say that, like the stage-coaches, they have vanished. Farming in these days is a business. Men are not satisfied with obtaining a living

by it, they look to making a fortune, and a good many of them succeed in doing so.

There is a story told of a youthful barrister who was so completely carried away by his own eloquence that he became quite oblivious of all details of his brief, and, after a supreme burst of most impassioned language, stopped, and whispered to the attorney, "What the devil is it the fellow is being tried for? I have clean forgot!" I must plead guilty to a somewhat similar loss of the thread of my argument upon this occasion; but it is difficult not to be discursive when speaking of a real Autumn day.

On the top of the before-mentioned hazel-crowned knoll, that constituted one of the chief ornaments of Thurton Park, are Miss Collingham and Gracie. They recline on the grass close to the edge of the copse, in order to enjoy the grateful shade of the tall bushes. Dandy is curled up at Sylla's feet, his black nozzle resting between his bright tan paws—an occasional twitch of his ears at the pertinacity of the flies the sole sign that he is not wrapped in the soundest of slumbers. Gracie has been reading aloud to her friend, but the book, at the present moment, has dropped negligently on her lap, and the girl's dreamy eyes are striving vainly to pierce the vista of the future. She muses over this secret of her lover's more than is good for her. She is very loyal and trusting to Charlie, but it must be borne in mind that she lives amongst people who are willing to credit anything to his disadvantage—amidst rumours to his detriment not pleasant for his betrothed to listen to. Sylla's hand steals quietly into hers, and Miss Collingham inquires gently—

"Dreaming, Gracie!—what about? What makes you so still?"

"Foolish thoughts," replied Miss Holbourne. "I was thinking of all these absurd Aldringham stories about Charlie, for one thing."

"You did right to say foolish thoughts!" cried Sylla, hotly. "You should despise such calumny, and banish it from your mind."

"I do despise it—I do look upon it all as false, mali-

cious libel; but," said Grace, sadly, "I cannot but muse over it, try what I will. Sylla, it is harder than you deem to have to sit silent and passive, while your lover's character is torn slowly to shreds before you—when your teeth grate, and the blood surges madly through your veins, to feel it incumbent to preserve a nonchalant demeanour. I tore a pocket-handkerchief literally to pieces in stifling my wrath the other night, and was utterly unconscious of what wild work my fingers had made, till I got home."

"Yes, I can fancy it hard upon you; but remember it won't be for long. You must be patient, for Charlie's sake."

The remark jarred upon Gracie's ears slightly. Sylla was too apt to think that self-sacrifice for her brother was a privilege that any girl might glory in.

"I am bearing a good deal for Charlie's sake just now, did he but know it," she retorted, petulantly.

"True, replied Miss Collingham, with some slight anxiety manifest in her voice; "but, Gracie, dear, surely where one loves that very love carries power of endurance with it, and he only asks you to trust him a little while still."

As his mistress spoke, Dandy raised his head sharply, and with pricked ears snuffed the air. Grace did not notice him, but the dog's eyes were turned towards the copse, and his nostrils quivered slightly, though he made no further movement.

"If our engagement was but acknowledged," replied Miss Holbourne, after a pause of some duration—"if I was but known to be Charlie's affianced bride—then half my troubles—"

"Who talks of being Charles Collingham's affianced bride?" interrupted a low stern voice behind her, as Sir John issued from the bushes. "My hearing must have played me false, Gracie; I cannot have caught your last words right."

A slight cry broke from Sylla's lips, and she buried her face in her hands as her father's speech smote upon her ears. For a few seconds Miss Holbourne also was covered confusion, but quickly recovering herself, she

sprang to her feet, and, with flushed face, confronted the Baronet.

"What nonsense is this you two are talking?" continued Sir John, with lowering brow. "What do you mean, Gracie, by speaking of being engaged to Charles Collingham?"

"You have surprised our secret," returned the girl in firm, defiant tones. "I am not sure but that I am well pleased that you have. The concealment has ever been hateful to me. Sir John," she said, and here her voice dropped, "I have promised to marry Charlie, and, come weal come woe, I'll keep my word!"

The Baronet's face was troubled, and for some seconds he made no reply. At last he said gravely, "Charles Collingham is nothing to me now, and I have no right to interfere with him in any way; but I have a right to protect my god-daughter. It is no pleasant thing to be called upon to proclaim one's son a scoundrel, but if he has sought your hand, Grace, he is nothing else. He is already married!"

Again a cry broke from Sylla's lips, and the blind girl cowered to the earth in her dismay; but Grace raised her head proudly, and her dark eyes flashed as she replied,

"I have been called upon to face that calumny these months past, and my heart has not failed me. You, Sir John, at least might have spared me such vulgar taunt! Pitiless I saw you to Charlie with my own eyes in the Aldringham ball-room. It's little likely that you will judge him fairly. I believe and trust him thoroughly, else had I never given him my promise. That promise I intend to abide by."

"How can you, child?" replied the Baronet harshly. "You don't intend to abet him in bigamy, I presume? You talk like a romantic love-sick girl—as indeed I suppose you are. The sooner you come to your senses and break off all connection with him, the better. He has evidently deceived you in a way that even I did not deem him capable of."

Gracie was staggered. Boundless as her faith in Charlie was, yet it was trying to have this scandal con-

cerning him, to which she had so resolutely shut her ears, deliberately confirmed by his own father. She knew Sir John well. Relentless and hard man though he was, she knew that he would not soil his lips with an untruth; what he now stated he doubtless believed himself. What was she to do? What was she to think? Still, if her own tones were lower, they were none the less firm as she replied.

"I will hold to my promise till what you allege against him is proved."

"There is but slight difficulty in doing that," returned the Baronet, "as I will show you in a few days' time. But it is getting time to go in. Let us forget this unpleasant conversation for the present."

"As if that were possible," murmured Grace, as she drew Sylla's arm within her own and the three walked somewhat moodily back to the house.

A sad drive home was Miss Holbourne's that evening. Little recked she of the glorious harvest moon and the flower-scented air, of the delicious calm and stillness, broken only by the creaking of the carts as they rolled from field to homestead, laden with golden grain. She had borne herself bravely thus far, but Sir John's testimony against his son bowed the proud head, and, though she had suffered no sign of weakness or unbelief to escape her at Churton, yet the tears trickled fast from Gracie's eyes as the carriage swept back to Aldringham. She knew that she had staked her all. Could it be that the master of her heart was what his father even held him! She had believed and clung to her belief in him despite all these rumours. But now, alas! that belief was shaken. Sir John might be stern, unforgiving, but he would scorn to say the thing that was not. Had she thrown all the richness of her virgin love away upon a traitor—untrue to his wife, untrue to her? Was she but the sport of a confirmed *roue's* idle whim?

Grace closed her eyes and shivered. No, she must trust on still; and should such trust turn out at last misplaced—ah! then she would be indeed bankrupt! And once more the girl shuddered at the thought of such an awakening from her love-dream.



CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CARADOC ARMS.

MR. LIGHTFOOT and the partner of his life are at breakfast in their sunny sitting-room in John Street. Mr. Lightfoot is apparently in exuberant spirits. He makes much vocal reference to "the old gentleman who lived in a second-floor back in Chancery Lane," as is his custom when greatly pleased with anything. He chips the top of his egg in a manner positively sportive, and expresses his opinion that eggs and idiots are produced in corresponding proportion. "Really," soliloquises Mr. Lightfoot, "the credulity and curiosity of mankind must be practised on to be comprehended. It is a remarkable thing, my dear," he continued, addressing his wife, "that it never rains but it pours. Blessed if here is not another party all agog to know what has become of Miss Cheslett, and to think that I should have been such a fool as to let that girl slip away without my knowing where she was bound for. As if it was not a moral certainty that she would be inquired after."

"Well, Leo, I don't suppose she will give you much trouble to find."

"Then the less you indulge in suppositions, Mrs. Lightfoot, the better. She seems to have utterly vanished from Farringdon Street Station. That is nothing, but that she could disappear with a considerable amount of

luggage, and leave no trace, *is* mysterious. I have ascertained that she saw Miss Langworthy before she left Baker Street, or, to speak more correctly, a lady, who, I have no doubt, was her. Now, from my knowledge of Miss L., I think it quite possible that, if she had a hold upon this girl, she was quite capable of worrying her over Waterloo Bridge. I think if she had a sister by the throat, her grip would be somewhat relentless. But, then, how about the portmanteaus? You can't make away with yourself and baggage."

"No, of course; she has done nothing of that kind," returned Mrs. Lightfoot. "I am surprised at your not having hit off a clue to her hiding-place before this."

"Don't be irritating, Etta. This, and that Collingham's marriage business, are two of the most aggravating cases I ever had in hand."

"Never mind the latter, Leo, that's my business just now. The church registers of London can't be overhauled in a day, unless you spend a deal more money over it than we can afford. I am getting on very well. If there was a marriage, and it took place in London, I shall know all about it before the month's out."

"My love," replied Mr. Lightfoot, in his airiest manner, "I intend to leave that to your intelligence for the present, and dedicate my own energies to the discovery of Miss Cheslett, and this Aldringham young lady's little game. I don't understand her anxiety for this marriage certificate. As to her inquiries regarding Miss Cheslett, right or wrong, I have a theory about them."

"That she is in love with Mr. Holbourne. Yes, that I should think you are probably right about. But you have an excuse for seeing Mr. Collingham now. Why not do it, and try if you can make anything out of him?"

"Because I have strong reasons, consequent upon a couple of previous irregular visits, for not intruding again upon Mr. Collingham's residence. That certificate has got something to do with Miss Cheslett—but how? He couldn't have been married to her, at all events, five years ago."

"Not much use speculating upon it until we get it, Leo. You're always too theoretical."

"Prosaic woman! Know that a detective without imagination is like a hound without nose. Deficiency in that faculty on their part has enabled one or two notable criminals to slip through their fingers. They failed to shake off their individuality, and never got beyond speculating what they themselves would have done under similar circumstances. Instead of which," exclaimed Mr. Lightfoot, with enthusiasm, "the moment you find yourself at fault, discard your first theory. Better to conceive a new one, however wild, than keep hammering away at a cold scent."

"Very well, Leo, you trust to your imaginative powers to find Miss Cheslett, and leave me and steady hard work to find that certificate," returned Mrs. Lightfoot drily, as she rose and left the room.

Her husband paced up and down for some time, lost in meditation. He was strictly carrying out his own theory, and trying to imagine what a girl like Lettice would probably do under the circumstances. He had subjected Sarah to a most insidious cross-examination, had contrived to interest that damsel in the success of his search by the unscrupulous affirmation that he was employed to discover Miss Cheslett by some distant relations who desired to offer her a home. He had formed a pretty correct idea of the circumstances that had led Lettice to fly from her old lodgings. He had ascertained that, spite of what she had said upon leaving, she was not likely to have any friends to take refuge with. All this Mr. Lightfoot had carefully pieced together. Now the problem was where Lettice was likely to take refuge. A town-bred girl, he thought, would scarce leave London. What part of the big city had she lived in before she came to Baker Street? Most likely she would seek an asylum in a neighbourhood that she was previously acquainted with.

"Yes," mused Lightfoot, "that's it. I'll give up trying to pick up the trail at Farringdon Street. I'll go up to Baker Street and see if I can make out at all where they lived before they came there, and if I can, by gad I'll try that! She would be likely to go back to her old lodgings, or their vicinity—not but that I think a look in

at 'The Carrot' on Saturday night might be advisable. The cabmen on the Clerkenwell beat crop up there pretty thick on Saturdays, and it is as well not to throw a chance away. In the meantime, here goes;" and Mr. Lightfoot donned his hat, took up a thickish walking-stick with an imposing tassel, and emerged into the street, to all intents a most respectable citizen. Still there was a jauntiness about Mr. Lightfoot's walk, an impropriety in the angle at which he wore his rather too glossy hat, which savoured rather of the stock exchange than of the quiet, decent burgess. He was both genial and animated in his progress; stopping upon one occasion to pick up a child that, having been overturned, was filling the air with its lamentation; upon another to witness an act of Punch; upon a third, to hold some slight gossip with a crossing-sweeper; but whatever he was about, Mr. Lightfoot's eyes were ever alert and vigilant. In due time he arrived at the north end of Baker Street, in company with a barrel organ and some white mice. Bestowing sixpence on the cunning Savoyard, Mr. Lightfoot strolled leisurely along the pavement, while his quondam companion discoursed much lugubrious music from the roadway.

Mr. Lightfoot wished, if possible, to obtain an interview with Sarah without ringing at the house. He judged nothing more likely to bring a servant-maid to the front door than an afternoon organ. In the morning, as he knew, they can seldom spare the time, but, north of Portman Square, the afternoon organ is quite a recognised entertainment amongst the denizens of the basement story. Cook, Mary Jane, and William Buttons, all rush up the area steps for a little fresh air and gossip, so soon as the seducing tones of "If ever I cease to love" resound through the street.

Mr. Lightfoot proves right in his conjecture. A most monotonous rendering of "Down among the coals" brings Sarah to the door, and he has little trouble in attracting that handmaiden's notice, and in beckoning her to his side.

"Lor! Mr. Saunders," she exclaimed, "who'd ha' thought of seeing you to-day! Have you found out anything about Miss Lettice?"

"No—not, that is to say, for certain. I don't suppose we shall know the number of the house until the day after to-morrow."

"Only to think now!—it's wonderful!" exclaimed Sarah, in open-eyed astonishment at this proof of the extraordinary powers of the secret police, of which force she deemed Mr. Saunders, as he thought fit to designate himself, a member.

"No," continued Mr. Lightfoot; "there's not much in it. As we supposed she would naturally go back to where she lived before she came here." And he looked somewhat inquisitively at his companion.

"And she has? She's gone back there!" exclaimed the girl.

Mr. Lightfoot felt a slight inclination to shake Sarah for the baldness of her rejoinder, but then it was possible she did not know where Lettice had previously resided.

"Yes," he said, at last; "that's what we think—where was it you told me?"

"Oh! Islington," exclaimed Sarah, quickly; but I don't know what street, or anything of that sort."

Mr. Lightfoot indulged in a low whistle.

"Ah!" he said; "yes, I recollect, thank you. I'll call round and let you know, when it's all right. I daresay you'd be glad to hear." And, nodding pleasantly to Sarah, he went on his way.

"Islington!" mused Mr. Lightfoot, as he strolled leisurely westwards. "If my theory has anything in it, Miss Cheslett, likely as not, is living within half a mile of me. It may be in the same street—it may be in the next house; I shouldn't be surprised. Now," thought the adventurer, with that intense appreciation of his own abilities which constituted such a prominent trait in his character, "most men would have continued puzzling their heads over that lost clue at Farringdon Station, or have begun to cast about in the country. It's a great thing to be imaginative in these cases. I'll bet a sovereign that girl is somewhere in Islington, and I'll stick to looking up my own parish for the next two or three days."

In Red Lion Street, abutting on Clerkenwell Green,

was a well-to-do tavern called "The Caradoc Arms." It did a thriving if roughish trade in the vicinity, and was notably a house of call for cabmen. To its *habitués* it was known familiarly as "The Carrot," an endearing abbreviation which originated in the abortive attempts of an old and valued customer to articulate its name at a late hour in the evening. The joke had spread, and the new *sobriquet* became common in the mouth of all frequenters of the house. That it was an old building was evident from the outside elevation. But the bar differed little from half a hundred houses of the same stamp within a mile of it, unless it was that it was rather more roomy and commodious. There were the same gigantic barrels labelled Old Tom, Kinahan's LL, and Cognac; the same wooden settles, the same smart ringleted young ladies behind the counter; but a critical eye might have noticed that the latter were supplemented by a couple of bull-necked, low-browed, broad-shouldered male assistants, who looked marvellously fitted to put anyone out who might wax riotous in his cups.

The throng in front of the brass decorated beer-engine, at which the barmaids work as sailors at the pumps in a leaking ship, is also of the usual type. The trembling, pale-faced, red-nosed, habitual dram-drinker—the strong, noisy, truculent ruffian—the quiet artisan who has but lately resorted to the fatal stimulant—the decent workman who has dropped in for his evening pint—the flushed, too full-lipped woman irretrievably bitten with gin-fever—the pale, bruised girl who shrinks spiritless in the corner, waiting till it shall please her lord and master to come home, and express the exhilaration of his feelings by knocking her down and dancing on her. All the ordinary types that figure at such places have here their exemplars. But you would still be puzzled to understand why it should be considered favoured by the knights of the whip, inasmuch as there are but some two or three of them to be seen amid the motley throng.

But on the left is a door which opens into an apartment, half tap-room, half coffee-room, and it is this inner sanctuary which the cabmen of the Clerkenwell circuit chiefly affect, albeit it is by no means exclusively confined

to their cloth. It is a long, somewhat narrow parlour, with sanded floor and several scattered wooden tables and benches. A portrait of the late Mr. Sayers in fighting costume figures over the fire-place, and some half dozen prints of terriers of rat-killing fame, and of pedestrians of mark, decorate the walls. Around the tables are grouped all the varieties of the cab-driving class, from the driver of the swell hansom (and be it understood that there are hansoms and hansoms), with a white hat, a flash belcher handkerchief, and a sprig of geranium in his coat, to the driver of the night-cab, who is clothed apparently in patched sack-cloth, rejoiceth in a "gin and fog voice," and, like his vehicle, should be seen only through the shadows of imperfect gaslight.

Holding forth to a small knot of his intimates at one of the centre tables, is a dark whiskered man, a very gem of his class. He wears a low-crowned, curly-brimmed felt hat, a light drab overcoat, with a somewhat faded rose in the button-hole, is smoking a short cutty-pipe, and narrating to his audience how he drove a fare to Bromley Races.

"He was a queer fish that. I'd seen him about many places before, racing, at Shepherd's Bush, down the river to a boat race, and such like—and I never forgets a face, I don't. He hailed me in Farringdon Street. 'Are you for sport?' says he, 'because I want to go to Bromley.' 'All right, sir,' said I, touching my hat. 'What's your fare?' he asked. 'Stop, never mind that—I am going down to back "Happy-go-lucky" for the handicap, to win me a couple of hundred—here's five per cent. if it comes off, and you shall give me my drive for nothing if it loses.' Well, I rather fancied that 'oss, so 'In with you, sir,' says I, 'it's a bargain.' The horse won, and he handed me a tenner when he got back to town. That's what I call a satisfactory outing, eh, mates?"

"Not bad!" exclaimed a sporting-looking gentleman in tall shiny hat, pepper-and-salt cut-away, rather light trousers, and wearing a scarf pinned with a fox's tooth. He was evidently not of the guild, although he fraternized easily with them, and was apparently well known—at all events, to some of them. "That's very good,

Durfey," he continued. "Now, that comes of keeping your eye on faces. Lord, if you men only did take count of who you pick up and put down, why, there's five-pound notes innumerable you might put in your pockets."

"I don't quite follow you," observed Mr. Durfey.

"Why, you'd never have taken up that fare on those terms, only you recognised him as a gentleman in the ring. You can't think how many five-pound notes there are for men of your trade who can only recollect where they drove certain people to a few weeks back. Somebody's always wanting to know something of that kind. Why, here have I this minute got a ten-pound note to give to any one of you who can tell me where he drove a young lady and her luggage to on the afternoon of the 13th of last month from Farringdon Street Station."

There was a low murmur amid the group, and more than one question was put to the sporting gentleman, who, it is needless to say, was Lightfoot, as to particulars.

"That's a sum as ought to be ciphered out!" exclaimed Mr. Durfey, oracularly. "Give us time to digest it, sir, and we'll ease you of that money yet."

"The sooner the better, as far as I am concerned," returned Mr. Lightfoot; and he rose and wandered across to another group, to whom he speedily introduced his little puzzle.

Sitting in a corner by himself, with a wide-awake slouched over his brows, was a dark-haired man, attired in the garb of an ostler, if that class can be said to wear raiment distinctive of their vocation. He looked like an ostler rather run to seed, who had found employment and sixpences scarce of late, and had been driven to betake himself to horseholding and odd jobs for a livelihood. He sat moodily smoking and drinking, without deigning to hold converse with his species, as if times were so bad with him that they did not admit of talking over. He listened attentively to Lightfoot's speech, bending slightly forward to catch the remarks upon it that followed, and puffing forth dense clouds of tobacco smoke as he did so.

Mr. Lightfoot, meanwhile, was here, there, and everywhere—he fluttered in and out like thrushes in the

Spring-time; he was gossiping at this table, hobnobbing at that, and even essayed a verse or two of a song in one place, at which he paused for a few minutes in his mercurial circuit. It bore reference to "Chancery Lane," and met with a somewhat equivocal success. But wherever he stopped and gossiped, there, in some shape or other, did Mr. Lightfoot eventually propound his enigma, and proffer ten pounds for a solution of the same.

Still the swarthy ostler continued to smoke and watch Mr. Lightfoot's proceedings, with face blank as a wall, and eyes fast relapsing into the vacant stare of intoxication. At times he appeared to be trying to write with his forefinger amidst the spilt ale on the table; then he took a blunt bit of pencil and a greasy card from his waistcoat pocket, and with some labour succeeded in writing a few words upon it. That done, he gave vent to a grin of mixed cunning and imbecility, and restored card and pencil, as he thought, to his pocket, but the card slipped through his half-paralysed fingers, and fluttered beneath the table. Watching him with the eye of a gled was a man who, to judge from his dress, was a small tradesman. He was apparently absorbed in his newspaper, and the management of a long clay pipe—a veritable churchwarden. What with the paper and the cloud of smoke in which he at times enveloped himself, it was not easy to get a fair look at his face. But from under cover of that paper he was observing closely all that passed. He was seated at the same table as the ostler. Neither a word of Lightfoot's speech, nor the keen interest manifested in it by his neighbour, escaped him. When the latter turned away in order to more easily follow Lightfoot's movements, the smoker of the long pipe leant over and gazed keenly at the tracings his wet finger had made on the rough oak table. He made out a *j* and an *o*, but could distinguish nothing further; but apparently even these two letters had rather changed the current of his thoughts, for whereas his eyes had roved, over the top of both his spectacles and paper, keenly round the room at times, he now contented himself with watching narrowly the movements of his neighbour. He eyed the ostler's struggle with the blunt pencil and

greasy card with much interest, saw the card slip through his beer-sodden fingers, and fall beneath the table—dived almost immediately in pursuit of his own tobacco-box, which he let fall with somewhat ostentatious clamour, and in less than thirty seconds that soiled piece of pasteboard was in his waistcoat pocket.

The ostler meanwhile, after staring vacantly at Lightfoot for some time, suddenly turned abruptly to his neighbour, and whispered confidentially, "Know all 'bout it—ten poundsh in pocket. Say whish was it—sheems to be two. Take table out o' way. Give sh arm—feel little drunk. Gemman who'sh got ten pounds—zat's man."

Hereupon the ostler, steadying himself by the table, rose to his feet, and edged cautiously out from the bench on which he had been sitting. As long as he had the benefit of the table to support him he did pretty well, but having cleared his bench he made a frantic clutch at the empty air, as if taking somebody's arm, and exclaiming wildly, "Whish is it?" his legs doubled up under him like a dislocated camp-stool, and with a heavy crash he came to the ground.

A man drunk at "The Carrot" was scarcely a sight to make the frequenters thereof even look round. The helpless ostler was picked up and laid upon a bench.

"Cut his head a bit against the table," observed one of the Samaritans who assisted in these semi-funereal rites, "but he'll perhaps be all the better for it in the morning. A little blood-letting's good for the constitution."

Whether he was better for it or worse was a point upon which he had no opportunity of testifying, as the blow in his state of intoxication produced congestion of the brain, and the morrow's sun saw his trials and struggles in this world brought to a conclusion.

Prominent among those who had come to the assistance of the ostler in his fall had been his neighbour of the newspaper. This man manifested much sympathy with the senseless drunkard, assisted in placing him upon the bench destined to prove his bier, and, little dreaming his race was all but run, showed much curiosity regarding

him. Who was he?—did anyone know him? Had he any friends there?

Yes, there were plenty of them knew him—Shiny Dick was his name. Who was he? Well, he used to drive a hansom, but the drink got hold of him, and he lost his licence—masters wouldn't employ him; he'd come down in the world, and cadged about for a living. He often did a turn of driving for an old friend who wanted a day to himself. He could be trusted to keep sober for a job, though he was of no use in that way for long together.

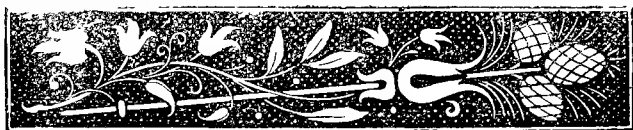
That respectable tradesman then took his departure. As he passed through the bar, he paused beneath the gas-light, and drawing the greasy card from his pocket, looked at it attentively. It was an old cab-ticket, and bore, in straggling hieroglyphics, the words—"August 13th. John Street, Islington." A twinkle of satisfaction gleamed from his eyes as he issued from the door.

"Ha, ha!" he exclaimed, in low, chuckling tones, "my dear Lightfoot, I think I have had a little the best of you to-night. I fancy I have got what you were offering ten pounds for, without spending a shilling." And, still laughing softly to himself, Mr. Bullock wended his way homewards.

As for the vivacious Mr. Lightfoot, he had cast but a cursory glance at the slight commotion occasioned by the fall of the drunken man, and had betaken himself to Islington without deigning to interfere in that commonplace catastrophe.

"Nothing to be got out of the cabmen, I reckon," he mused, as he wended his way up Farringdon Road. "I'll stick to investigating my own parish, for the present."





CHAPTER XXX.

MARION CHANGES HER GAME.

MISS LANGWORTHY, albeit a young lady of much discrimination of character, is destined to be sorely mistaken concerning the effects of her craftily-worded epistle on Reginald. She had read him thoroughly aright so far, and was quite justified in the assertion that he was but as wax in her hands. But she does not know—she has had no opportunity of observing, the change that his love for Lettice has wrought in him. Reginald Holbourne is strong in resolve, at present, and having thoroughly mastered his cousin's epistle, makes up his mind to put an end to the existing relations between them for good and all. He pens a letter to his father, in which, while admitting his boyish engagement to Marion, he repudiates all idea of ever fulfilling it. He frankly admits that he is behaving badly—that no fault in word or deed is to be attributed to his cousin—that he has nothing to justify him further than that he was but a boy when he entered into this contract—that this boyish fancy has been superseded by a genuine passion—that his troth is now pledged to Lettice Cheslett—and that he is thoroughly convinced a marriage with Marion could but entail life-long misery upon both of them. Marion having expressed a wish, to prevent all misconception, that the engagement between them should be acknowledged on his part previous to its

being cancelled, he obeyed her behest, and took the opportunity of begging her forgiveness for the wrong he had unwittingly done her.

He had intended to have written to Marion also, but happening to give an outline of his letter to his father to Charlie Collingham, that gentleman so strongly advised the omission of such communication that Reginald gave way, and left his epistle to attain the desired results single-handed. Consequently, when the banker, with much importance—much elevation of eyebrow and pursing of lips—requested to speak with Miss Langworthy in his own room, that young lady was filled with no little astonishment. Rare had been the occasion upon which Mr. Holbourne had summoned either her or Gracie to a conference in that peculiar sanctum, and Marion marvelled much as she followed her uncle as to what it was that could give cause for so portentous an interview betwixt them.

"Sit down," said Mr. Holbourne, as he closed the door; "I want to talk to you about Reginald. I have received a letter from him this morning, which, I confess, astonishes me not a little." And the banker deposited himself in an easy-chair, and began, after his wont in difficulties, to toy somewhat nervously with his eye-glass. If truth must be told, he stood somewhat in awe of his niece, and felt some little embarrassment upon opening the conversation.

Marion saw that at a glance, but she was far from suspecting the contents of Reginald's letter.

"What is it, uncle?" she said, smiling—"has he got into a scrape? Has he been spending more money than is quite defensible! Young men of his age will fall into such mistakes at times."

"No," replied the banker—"it's nothing of that kind. He tells me—most extraordinary thing that it never occurred to a keen-sighted man like myself before! Very odd you neither of you ever gave me the slightest reason to think such might be the case. I can see as far into a millstone as my neighbours—in fact, my friends say an inch or two farther, but I never dreamed of this."

Miss Langworthy began to have some inkling of the

truth, and yet she could hardly believe that Reginald had avowed their engagement. She said nothing, but awaited quietly, to see what her uncle would say next.

"Well," continued Mr. Holbourne, after a short pause, "why don't you tell me all about it?"

He fidgeted restlessly in his chair as he spoke, and the double eye-glass was on his nose, off his nose, shut up, opened, wiped with his pocket-handkerchief, and generally experienced a hard time of it.

"You must let me know rather more, uncle," she said, at length, speaking with great deliberation, as if she were weighing every word that escaped her lips. "So far I am at a loss to think what there is for me to tell."

"Chut! child," replied the banker, querulously; "what is this between you and Reginald?"

"You have his letter. I have no doubt he has put it plainly. What is it you would know from me?" and Miss Langworthy eyed her uncle keenly. She was determined to know what Reginald had said before she opened her mouth on the subject.

"He says that you are engaged to be married to him," blurted out Mr. Holbourne, with visible effort.

"It is true," returned Marion in a low voice. "I know I have behaved very ill in yielding to him so far without your knowledge. You have been very good to me, uncle. I have urged sometimes that we should do better to seek your sanction to our engagement; but we were both weak, foolish, and afraid;" and then Miss Langworthy bowed her head in an attitude of the prettiest possible contrition.

Now it is highly probable that Mr. Holbourne, in the first instance, would have felt extremely indignant at the idea of his son's contemplating marriage with his cousin, had he known it originally. He would naturally think that Reginald might do better. But as it was now put before him, Reginald was apparently breaking off this engagement to contract one still more objectionable. Who was this perfectly obscure young lady that he now proposed to make his bride? At all events he seemed to have no favourable intelligence to communicate as regarded her status or belongings. Mr. Holbourne consequently bethought him that it might be preferable that

his son and Marion should make a match of it, rather than that this latter arrangement should be carried out.

"You need not feel any compunction," observed the banker drily. "Whatever my opinion might have been on the subject, I am spared all expression concerning it. Master Reginald, in this precious epistle, although stating that he is engaged to you, takes the opportunity of informing me that he is going to marry some one else."

"I am rightly punished," murmured Marion, without raising her head. "I deserve to suffer for my folly and gross ingratitude. Let the blame rest upon me. I have deceived you, and now I also am deceived. I have no claim on your pity, uncle, but, believe me, you are amply avenged."

There was a silence of some minutes between them. Miss Langworthy, with her face buried artistically in her handkerchief, presented a very perfect pose of conscience-stricken woe, while inwardly her fertile brain was running over what she had better do next. Mr. Holbourne meantime hemmed and fidgeted. He was an object pitiable to contemplate at this time. The weak, pompous, good-natured banker was desperately puzzled as to how it behoved him to take things. He could not be angry with his niece. The cause of offending in her case was already removed, while, as she herself said, her punishment was already meted out to her. Of course the more he thought upon it, the clearer it became to Mr. Holbourne that Reginald's conduct was simply inexcusable. He had jilted his cousin, and was about to tarnish the glory of the Holbournes by wedding a nobody. Gradually the banker worked round to the conclusion that it was incumbent upon him to manifest much wrath with his misguided son. It was a necessity that he should lose his temper with somebody, and everything indicated that the somebody should be Reginald.

Suddenly his musing is interrupted by the soft tones of his niece. Marion, as already mentioned, possessed that rarest of woman's attributes, a most musical voice. In low tremulous accents she falters forth her inquiry as to who it is that Reginald is about to marry.

"It may be foolish uncle; it shows want of pride, I

know, but he has so thoroughly trampled upon my self-esteem that I care not. I feel bowed to the very dust with shame, to think how lightly I let my heart out of my own keeping. Tell me, please, the name of this woman for whom I am scorned." And Marion raised her face and gazed at her uncle.

That she knew perfectly well the name of her rival we have already seen, but in these few minutes Miss Langworthy had projected a fresh scheme in her restless brain, and had determined to prosecute it at once with all the energy and subtlety of her nature. It presented two points peculiarly attractive to Marion—namely, the gratification of her revenge as regarded her cousins in the first place, and a strong possibility of personal aggrandizement in the sequel.

"A Miss Lettice Cheslett," replied Mr. Holbourne, slowly. "Do you know anything about her!"

"Ah! it is as I feared," cried Marion, clasping her hands passionately. "I have heard of her, no matter how. I could have borne it better had I been thrust on one side to make room for some one worthy of him. But to be scorned for the designing daughter of a mere lodging-house keeper! It is hard! Uncle, if you have any love for Reginald, interfere, to prevent his ruining himself for life. This girl thinks to attain position by marrying him. She has taken advantage of Reginald's facile disposition, and practised on him all the arts of a clever, unscrupulous *intrigante*. She deems him rich, as son of the great Aldringham banker. Let her comprehend the prize is not so well worth winning as she thinks. I have no right to give such advice, but I loved him, and though all is over between us, am loth to see him rivet fetters of misery that can never be loosened."

She ceased, and once more buried her face in her hands. Her appeal moved Mr. Holbourne strongly. The delicate reference to him as the great Aldringham banker tickled his vanity, and made the idea of his son's being entrapped into such a degrading marriage more vividly repulsive than before. Yes, he would exert his authority, and Reginald should know that, unless he at once abandoned all further intimacy with Miss Cheslett,

he was to look for no assistance of any kind from his father in future.

"You are a good girl, Marion," replied the banker, "and are much more thoughtful for this young good-for-nothing than he deserves. I shall write to him, and give him clearly to understand that he must choose between this young woman and me. I have no more to say further than this, that, though you were wrong in concealing what had passed between you and Reginald in the first instance, you have behaved very well now."

"And you forgive me, uncle?" murmured Miss Langworthy, as she rose.

"Yes. If you were foolish you have paid dearly for it. Now go. I must write to Reginald."

"You are very good to me," replied Marion, meekly, as she left the room.

What sort of a letter a man of Mr. Holbourne's temperament would write upon such an occasion it is easy to imagine. Instead of asking his son to pause, and think seriously before he committed himself to so important a step in life, the banker fulminated a decree to the effect that Reginald must either renounce his love or his father.

This, put in sharp, curt, peremptory form, was likely to have but one result. Both the letter and the reply were thoroughly foreseen by Miss Langworthy, and the formal renunciation of Reginald by his sire was a circumstance upon which she had reckoned with equal complacency and confidence.

Marion's new scheme was simply to oust both her cousins from their home. Like a young cuckoo, she was firmly established in the nest, and saw her way pretty clearly to sending one of the young hedge-sparrows sprawling on the world. It had occurred to her that there would be no great difficulty about the ejection of the other also. The possibility of removing Grace from the shelter of her father's roof would have occurred to few people, and would have seemed scarcely feasible, even if dreamt of; but Marion, whose confidence in her resources was boundless, thought it not only feasible, but an affair of no great difficulty.

Miss Langworthy is somewhat undecided in mind as to

whether she can make any use of an oblong strip of paper that has reached her by the morning's post. She has spent a great deal of money in the search of that scrap of writing, and is somewhat moodily coming to the conclusion that it is of no use to her now that she has got it. It certainly proves her theory right, for it is an attested copy of the register of St. Sepulchre's Church, whereby it appears that Charles Collingham, bachelor, and Lilian Melton, spinster, were duly made man and wife, on September the 7th, 1865. But Marion sees now that she has allowed her feelings to get the better of her judgment. In her first indignation against Grace, it was all very well to contemplate the luxury of revenge, and look forward to the moment when she should carelessly flip that little bit of paper across the table to her cousin, with a nonchalant "something intended for you, dear, that has reached my hands by mistake." Marion had mused over that scene many times, and vowed it should be enacted before a considerable audience, to boot. But now she thought otherwise. It would facilitate her new programme rather to clench Grace's rash engagement, than the reverse; even, if possible, to drive her into a clandestine marriage.

Miss Langworthy was little likely, in her present frame of mind to feel mercifully disposed towards her cousin; but, to do her justice, she looked upon it as tolerably certain that Charlie Collingham had no wife alive at present—that either death, or something else, had invalidated that marriage of which she now held the certificate. It might be he had ascertained that this woman to whom he had bound himself in his boyhood was already a wife, and had contracted a bigamous alliance with himself; or she might have died. That Marion did not pretend to know; but she held him at all events, clear of such incumbrance **now**.

"Yes," she mused, "the sooner she and Charlie Collingham make a match of it the better. That will at all events leave me mistress here. Reginald, I think, will pay pretty dearly for his behaviour to me, and is not likely to set foot in Aldringham for many a long day. And 'dear Grace's' wedding is likely to be a flitting for

good, I flatter myself;" and Marion's lip curled contemptuously as she thought of herself once more firmly reinstated as the banker's housekeeper. "I must be the veriest fool ever created if I can't keep the house to myself then!" muttered Miss Langworthy. Still her brows were knit slightly as she glanced at the letter which accompanied the certificate. It was from Mr. Lightfoot, and while felicitating her upon the satisfactory result to which he had conducted the enquiry she had commissioned him to make, it wound up with a polite but somewhat peremptory request for fifty pounds.

Miss Langworthy had winced for some time past at the calls which this gentleman made incessantly on her purse-strings. She looked gloomily back on the number of bank notes that had been forwarded to meet his expenses in her service since that interview in Kensington Gardens. She had fortunately a London banker, otherwise she could not have obtained money to meet these constantly recurring claims without her uncle's knowledge. To touch her capital involved Mr. Holbourne's signature, as she was not of age when what little money that accrued to her on the death of her parents had been invested for her use. She had borrowed from her London bankers a considerable sum, compared with her means, and these gentlemen had politely intimated, upon acceding to her last application, that they could not accommodate her further. Where was she to obtain this fifty pounds? She did not know. She could not even imagine a likelihood of procuring it. In desperation she wrote back to Mr. Lightfoot, and told him it was impossible, that she had no more money at present, nor was there a probability of her compassing such a sum for some few months.

Mr. Lightfoot's rejoinder arrived by return of post, and out of it fluttered an oblong bit of stamped paper. He sympathised most delicately with Miss Langworthy's temporary difficulty. It was a perplexity that he often encountered in business. He forwarded to Miss Langworthy the means of meeting it. If Miss L. would kindly sign the enclosed bill for fifty pounds at sixty days sight, where he had pencilled her signature, he would

undertake to get it discounted. Miss Langworthy could, of course, take it up at the expiration of that time, or renew it for a similar term at a trifling cost. But he regretted to say that the fifty pounds was an imperative necessity with him. Marion was a keen-witted woman, and although she knew nothing of bills, felt intuitively that there was danger in affixing her signature to that innocent-looking strip of paper. Yet what was she to do? This man pressed her hard for the money. That his claim for expenses, &c., was an egregious swindle, she entertained no doubt. But how was she to resist it? If she refused he would probably expose her, and as things stood at present that was to be avoided at all hazards. In two months it might be otherwise; at all events, a trifle would procure some further grace if it was not so; a sweet delusion likely to be rudely dissipated. Yet it was with dire misgivings that Miss Langworthy at last wrote her name across the slip of paper, much regretting that she had ever entered into relations with the astute Mr. Lightfoot.





CHAPTER XXXI.

MR. HOLBOURNE'S DISCOVERY.

THAT would have puzzled Mr. Holbourne to say how he learnt it. He could by no means have specified the lips from which he had derived his information. It seemed to him that he had discovered it for himself: that his knowledge of the fact had been of gradual growth. How he had arrived at it he knew not, but the banker by some means had come to understand that an engagement existed between his daughter and that discarded son of Sir John Collingham's.

Have we not all experience of how such shadowy tidings are vouchsafed us. That untraceable rumour that heralds the appearance of our friends at the altar, or in the bankruptcy court, has been encountered by most of us. Who they are that constitute this mysterious "they," that promulgate these hitherto occult facts in such resounding whisper, is matter difficult of comprehension. They correspond with the "we" of journalism; but even as among those of the literary guild, the "we" is a veil of much transparency, so the observer of a small social community will experience but slight difficulty in identifying the "they" of his little world.

Mr. Holbourne chews the cud of his indignation as this knowledge acquires palpable shape in his eyes. It is gradually dawning upon him that there is much belief in

this rumour evinced by the good people of Aldringham. He has become aware of late that this engagement is discussed with considerable animation—mixed, did he but know it, with more than a little speculation as to whether Mr. Charles Collingham would incur the pains and penalties of bigamy should it be fulfilled.

Miss Langworthy distils gossip for the avid ears of Aldringham, with singular dexterity. She is delicate in her operations as the wife of King Las, who whispered his secret to the reeds; and what rumour she thinks proper to set afloat is disseminated as successfully as that recorded in the old classical story. Mr. Holbourne could conscientiously have affirmed that his knowledge of Grace's engagement had not come to him through his niece. Marion certainly had never made direct allusion to it, but she had been at some pains to put him in the way of obtaining information on the subject. The banker is gradually steeling himself to have this matter out with his daughter. He feels that the subject will be disagreeable, and, like all weak men, he would fain postpone the discussion of anything unpleasant as long as possible. He has, moreover, an uneasy feeling that Grace will not prove quite so docile as he could wish—that she may possibly decline to yield to his wishes: in fact, he is conscious that the discussion of the affair will be by no means smooth, and that he and his daughter are likely to differ widely thereon.

Miss Langworthy, analysing her uncle's mind with unabated energy morning after morning, is, of course, aware of this intention upon his part, and awaits the result with considerable curiosity. She thinks it probable that such an interview will tend, in some degree, to the furtherance of her views. Miss Langworthy, indeed, from constant scheming, has got so into the habit of laying out her friends on a mental dissecting-table, and operating upon them with a psychological scalpel, that she can scarcely forego probing the motives of her acquaintances upon the most ordinary occasions. She wastes much time, after the usual fashion of these industrious searchers into moral delinquencies, and constantly arrives at discoveries so common-place that they

barely compensate for the trouble expended in attaining them. It may not be an agreeable hobby—persons bitten with this idiosyncrasy are best shunned; yet the constant practice of analysing the springs that move the minds of those among whom they may be thrown, tends, like the practice of other things, to endue such observers with wonderful powers of forecasting the actions of their associates—provided, of course, that they are acquainted with the causes from which such actions will arise.

Marion had already formed her opinion as to what, with some assistance from herself, would be the result of this conversation between father and daughter. She could not repress a smile as she heard Grace summoned officially to what might be designated the “domestic magistrate’s office,” and thought of her own appearance at the bar there a few mornings ago.

“What have you been doing, Gracie?” she exclaimed, laughing, as her cousin passed her. “Poor me was lectured last week! I hope you may get off more easily.”

Miss Holbourne made no reply, but followed her father into his room, and quietly seated herself.

The banker fidgeted at his writing-table, and nervously shut and opened his eye-glass for some minutes, after his wont, when strongly moved on any point.

“I want to talk to you, Grace—to talk to you—hem!”

“To talk to me!—about what, father?” inquired Grace, as she raised her eyes with some curiosity.

“Don’t interrupt me, child,” retorted Mr. Holbourne, sharply. “To talk to you about Mr. Charles Collingham.”

“About Charlie?” she replied, very quietly, although her face flushed slightly.

Ever since the discovery of her secret by Sir John, she had been prepared for this. He had sent her a short note to say that he had not been speaking at random, but that his son was married, and, to the best of his belief, had a wife still living; and adjured her, as she valued her own peace of mind, to break off all further relations with Charlie.

"Yes," resumed the banker, "it has come to my ears that you have been mad enough to promise to marry that good-for-nothing. Is this mere rumour, or is there truth in it?"

"It is true," she said, in a low voice.

"Good heavens! are you in your senses, child? You refuse to marry Robert, the eldest son, and are infatuated enough to take up with the younger, who is disowned, doubtless for most excellent reasons, by his own father."

"When those reasons are put before me, and it is proved beyond doubt that Charles Collingham has been guilty of dishonourable conduct, then will I give him up," returned Grace, defiantly. "But till then," she continued, in resolute tones, "I am his affianced wife, and I'll hold to it, come what may!"

"Upon my word," exclaimed Mr. Holbourne, adjusting his eye-glasses and regarding his daughter with unmitigated astonishment, "things have arrived at a pretty pass! Have you been attending lectures on woman's rights? Are you saturated with the absurdity designated advanced opinions? Were you not taught your Catechism in your childhood, and brought up to pay proper reverence to your parents?"

Grace bowed her head meekly.

"And do you think, Miss, that contracting an engagement with the first scapegrace that comes across your path is honouring your father, that his days may be long in the land? It's enough to send a man to his grave prematurely, to have a daughter who refuses an heir to a baronetcy, in order to marry his brother, who is likely to come into nothing but gratuitous apartments in Newgate."

"How dare you assert such things of Charles Collingham, father?" cried Grace with flashing eyes as she rose to her feet. "Aldringham gossip, I know, has dared to whisper foul slander concerning him, but I little thought to hear such scandal endorsed by your lips. Who is it that has poisoned your mind against him? Is it Marion that has brought this story to your ears? Tell me, I demand it as a right!"

Mr. Holbourne stared in bewilderment at his daughter.

He had never seen her so moved before, and was quite confounded by this tempestuous outbreak. He had deemed from her generally indolent habits that she was of a mild and placid disposition, and little dreamt of the fires that burnt beneath the crust of her usually languid manner.

He hesitated for a few seconds, during which Grace confronted him with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and then replied,

"No, it was not Marion. What put her into your head?"

"She has come between us much of late," returned the girl, bitterly, as she resumed her seat. "A little while back, father, and I knew not what it was to have a cross word from you; now it is seldom I can please you," and Grace dropped her head wearily on her hand, and wondered how it was all to end.

"I don't understand you, Grace," said Mr. Holbourne, after a short pause. "Some childish jealousy of your cousin, is, I presume, working in your mind; but you are really too old for that sort of thing now. However, that has nothing to do with the question between us; you admit this preposterous engagement—I require you to give me your word that it shall at once be put an end to."

"That I cannot give," was the low reply.

"Grace, I insist upon it!" exclaimed the banker angrily.

She raised her head and looked him steadily in the face. "Prove to me, father, that he is unworthy of my love, and it shall be as you wish; but I'll not gainsay my promise to Charles Collingham, though all the stones of Aldringham should prate stories of his wrong-doing, till I hold the proof of it."

"But he is said to be already married, girl!"

"I know it; there is very little to his disadvantage that they have not contrived, either through chance or malice, to din into my ears of late."

"You know it!" gasped the banker, "and——"

"Don't believe it," replied Gracie quickly. "Recollect, father, I'll admit nothing to Charlie's detriment

unless positive proof of such charge is placed before me. Convince me of what you allege, and I will obey you ; but till then, father, I'll remain loyal to the vow my lips have spoken."

As she spoke she had once more risen to her feet, and before her father could reply, glided quietly from the room.

Mr. Holbourne's meditations were by no means satisfactory after his daughter's departure. He wondered whether there was a parent in all England whose children so persistently determined to wed injudiciously as did his. "It's monstrous!" he murmured, "they must have taken positive pains to look about for ineligible partners. But I'll be no party to such boy and girl folly. They shall have neither consent nor assistance from me. Reginald I cannot influence further than I have already done. I have declined to contribute a shilling to his support, if he crosses me on this point. But as for Grace, I am entitled to use more coercion in her case, and I will."

Mr. Holbourne kept his word, and we shall see what came of it.





CHAPTER XXXII.

THIRTY-TWO, JOHN STREET.

MR. BULLOCK'S exhilaration upon arriving at home was a sight to see. He had indulged in much silent chuckling, and in many low-pitched snatches of melody, on his way from the "Caradoc Arms" thither. But once fairly ensconced in his own favourite arm-chair, he fairly bubbled over with grins and laughter. He had made, he thought, a hit to-night, but it was not that. Mr. Bullock had made some noted *coups* in his day, and could afford to take another bit of professional success with the nonchalance the force expected from such distinguished officers as himself. No, that was not the cause of Mr. Bullock's ecstasy; but to find out that the hated Lightfoot was also interested in the search. To feel a moral conviction that he had obtained, by his own vigilance and astuteness, what the detested Lightfoot was vainly proffering a reward of ten pounds to procure—to think that the lost clue had been virtually under his abhorred adversary's nose half the evening, and that that usually acute gentleman had overlooked it! Finally, most soothing of salves to his professional pride, he had contemplated Mr. Lightfoot's manœuvres, and sat for some time full in his sight, undetected, unsuspected. Remembering how sore Mr. Bullock had felt concerning the penetration of his disguise upon their last encounter, it is easy to

imagine that upon that one point alone it must have been a gratifying evening to him.

Mr. Bullock is of course as yet unaware that the drunken man he assisted to pick up is not destined to recover from the effects of his fall, and looks to obtaining some further information from him as soon as he shall recover his senses. Still Mr. Bullock fancies he has not much to learn beyond what the number of the house may be. Mr. Bullock piecing things together in his own mind, sees clearly that the ostler drove a friend's cab upon the day Lettice disappeared, which accounts for the difficulty of picking up the trail at the Farringdon Station. It was this man drove Miss Cheslett to John Street, Islington, and not being a regular cabman, he had not heard of the inquiries that had been made, until attracted by Lightfoot's speech. Then, cunning in his cups, the bemused man kept turning the thing over in his muddled brain, with a view to making the most of the information he had to give. Intoxication had supervened while he yet struggled with this knotty problem, and his resolution to take Lightfoot's offer had been come to just as he became physically unable to make his way across the room to that gentleman, who, on his part, little dreamt the occasion of that untimely downfall, or thought that the senseless man had dropped in his endeavours to reach him with the intelligence he so much coveted.

Mr. Bullock, arriving next morning at the "Caradoc Arms" in his ordinary costume, finds his *vis-à-vis* of the previous night awaiting an inquest, instead of being in readiness for the hospitality that he meditated bestowing upon him. Mr. Bullock consoles himself for this disappointment with the reflection that he has pretty well obtained the information he required, and that the dead man was more likely to have cast in his lot with the criminal classes than to have turned out an ornament to society. "He's as well out of the way in this shape, as any other," soliloquized the detective. "He was just about becoming troublesome, and had nothing much but Brixton or Portland to look forward to. It is as well for him he was taken by Providence right off. He'd have

been taken by us a little later if he'd lived, and there's a deal of unpleasantness spared all round by things as they are."

It was not likely that Mr. Bullock was going to communicate with his employer before, to use his own expression, he had "worked his case out." Now, though he had little doubt that he held the correct clue in his hand, yet he had still to ascertain in which house in John Street it was that Miss Cheslett had taken refuge. Simple this, you would say, for a police-officer; so it was, but Mr. Bullock recollected that his adversary lived in that identical street. He was strongly impressed with Mr. Lightfoot's astuteness, and had no intention of playing the part of jackal to that cunning marauder. Who was employing him upon the present occasion, or whether he was prosecuting some wily scheme of his own devising, was also a subject on which Mr. Bullock thirsted for information.

He walked quietly up to Islington, and at once put himself into communication with the superintendent of the police-station there. He remained quietly in the station, while the constable on the John Street beat prosecuted such inquiries as Mr. Bullock chose to entrust him with. The man was young in the force, and by no means blessed with intelligence. A constable of the stolid type, whose highest faculties comprehended little more than the rigid carrying out of such orders as might be given to him.

When he comes in he reports three recent arrivals in John Street. One of these is a male, and need, consequently, be no further investigated; the other two are females, but a few inquiries soon satisfy Mr. Bullock that neither of them is the young lady that he is in search of. R 37, who was upon that beat on the 13th of July, has no recollection of seeing a young lady arrive with a considerable amount of luggage, but adds that his beat extended considerably beyond John Street, and it was quite possible for such a thing to occur without his knowing anything about it.

Mr. Bullock decides to prosecute his inquiries in person, and accordingly lounges out to do so, keeping mean-

while a vigilant look-out for the appearance of his particular aversion, Lightfoot. The millinery and stationery shops of the neighbourhood are the first places to which he devotes his attention, It is at one of the latter that he first picks up some trace of the subject of his quest. Yes, the proprietor perfectly recollected a good-looking young lady in deep mourning buying some cardboard and gilt paper from him only two days before—he had offered to send it, but she said that she lived close by, and took it with her. No, he could not say where her home was exactly. Mr. Bullock accepts this as an indication of Miss Cheslett's presence in the vicinity, although it is but meagre evidence of the fact, and prosecutes his inquiries with redoubled vigour.

At a large milinery and drapery establishment he first comes upon a tangible trace of the young lady in mourning. He has heard vaguely and indistinctly of her at more than one shop that he has visited, but the proprietors, although unanimous in expression of their opinion that she lived in the neighbourhood, have so far been unable to indicate the exact whereabouts. But here the lady who presided over the millinery department was clear and precise. "A young lady in deep mourning," she said, in reply to Mr. Bullock's interrogatories, "had called there four days ago, and, somewhat to her surprise, had asked for employment. She was astonished, as the young lady from her dress and manner seemed superior to one dependent upon ordinary milliner's work; and she ventured to say as much, but the girl replied that she was thrown upon her own resources in consequence of the death of a very near relative, and should be thankful for any work they might be able to give her. I told her," continued the forewoman, "that I had nothing for her just now, but that if she would leave her address I would try her as soon as I had a chance. Here is the address she gave—Miss Cheslett, 32, John Street."

Mr. Bullock indulged in a quiet chuckle of satisfaction—a low, noiseless laugh peculiar to himself, and of which nothing but a slight screwing up of the eyes and drawing back of the lips gave evidence to the spectator. He had

doubtless found this inaudible laughter of value to him in his vocation, and had probably reduced his natural cachinnation by much mortification of his sense of the humorous.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said at length. "You're a lady as it's quite a pleasure to converse with. I belong to the detective police, and you can't think the trouble we have in my profession to get people to tell us what they know clearly and concisely. If you will allow me to say so, Miss—Miss—"

"Manners," supplied the lady, with a simper of gratification.

"Miss Manners, exactly. You're a pattern to your sex in that respect. It is rather a weakness of women, if you will excuse the remark," continued Mr. Bullock jocularly, "to be a little discursive in their evidence. They are apt to wander from the point, and favour us with what they think, instead of what they actually know."

"I'm sure I feel highly complimented," replied Miss Manners. "It's very gratifying indeed to receive such praise, sir, from a gentleman so well qualified to judge as yourself. But to be the object of such encomium twice in one day," continued the lady with a bashful titter, "might make any woman proud."

"I don't quite understand you," interjected Mr. Bullock quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Only that a gentleman called here about a couple of hours ago—a very pleasant gentleman, and full of fun—"

"Yes, yes. Get on, ma'am, please," exclaimed Mr. Bullock, impatiently.

"You needn't take one up so sharp," said Miss Manners, looking offended. "I'm sure I am telling you all about it as quickly as I possibly can."

"Of course; I beg your pardon for interrupting you," said Bullock. "This gentleman, as you were saying—"

"Was also inquiring after Miss Cheslett. I hope she's done nothing wrong, I'm sure, and I so nearly giving her some work and all."

"No, no, nothing of the sort," replied Bullock, impatiently.

"Well, he also said that I could tell what I had to tell most clearly and succinctly—those were his very words," and Miss Manners tossed her head in defiance of the impatience that her present questioner gave signs of.

"A fair-haired man, with keen grey eyes?" exclaimed Bullock.

"He was a fair, pleasant man, but I did not notice his eyes," returned the lady.

"Lightfoot, by the eternal!" muttered the detective.

"Thank you, Miss Manners," he exclaimed, hurriedly.

"I am very much obliged to you. Good morning!" And he hastily left the shop.

"The other is the most gentlemanly," said the forewoman, curtly. "To think of a girl coming here and wanting work who is wanted herself by the police! The brazened baggage! There's no knowing whom to trust in this world, or else I did think that pale-faced thing in mourning looked innocent enough." With which reflection Miss Manners betook herself once more to the superintendence of her work-girls.

"He's before me again, hang him!" mused Mr. Bullock, as he made his way rapidly towards John Street. "It's provoking, it is, considering how much the best I got of him last night. Curse his luck! He's picked up the trail here by accident. What does he want with her? What's brought him into the business? However, I suppose 32 will turn out all right enough. At all events, I shall soon see, and maybe find out what Lightfoot's driving at to boot. I should like to know that. Here we are!" And without more ado Mr. Bullock rang the bell.

Mr. Bullock had concocted a very neat story, with the assistance of Charlie Collingham, to retail to Lettice when he should find her, and therefore felt no compunction about asking for her.

"Is Miss Cheslett at home?" he inquired easily of the servant-girl who opened the door.

"No, sir. She left this yesterday afternoon."

"When will she be back? I want to see her upon business of importance."

"Dear me! I don't think she's coming back at all," replied the girl, with open-eyed astonishment. "Leastways, she took all her things with her, and her room's to let."

Mr. Bullock was generally fairly impassible in countenance, but he could not restrain a low whistle of surprise at this unlooked-for intelligence.

"And you don't know where she's gone?" he inquired.

"No, sir. But you'd best see missus."

"Exactly. Just ask if she would be good enough to speak to me for a few minutes."

The landlady soon made her appearance, and requested Mr. Bullock to step into her own private sanctum. But that gentleman, with all his acuteness, was speedily compelled to consider the interview most unsatisfactory.

Yes, the lady admitted, with the utmost candour, that Miss Cheslett had lodged there for the last five weeks. She was an old tenant, and had lived there with her grandfather for some months about two years ago. She left yesterday afternoon. She, the landlady, could not exactly say why, but fancied that it was to take some situation that had been offered her. Did she know Miss Cheslett's address? No, she had left no direction of any kind behind her; had never even alluded to what county she was going, nor to what railway-station she was to be driven to. Who were the people who took so much interest in Miss Cheslett?

"Thank ye, ma'am," said Mr. Bullock, as he rose to depart. "It's a cruel pity, for the young lady's own sake, her friends can't manage to communicate with her. She is running away under a considerable mistake, which ten minutes would dissipate, if she could be but seen for that space of time."

"If you would like to leave a letter on the chance of my hearing of her, and so having an opportunity to forward it, I shall be most happy to take charge of it," observed the landlady, suavely.

"Thank ye, you're very kind. I'll mention it to the young lady's friends, and they'll doubtless trouble you with a note upon the chance. Good day, ma'am."

Mr. Bullock paused when he gained the street, and with hat drawn over his eyes, and hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, became lost in meditation.

"Yes," he muttered, as apparently counting the eyelet holes in his boots, and dedicating his whole attention to the avoidance of stepping on the joining of the flag-stones, he moved slowly up the street. "She knows all about it. She knows where Miss Cheslett has gone. What did she volunteer to forward a letter for, if she had no address left her? What made her talk about counties, and hint at terminuses? She was too communicative not to know, and overplayed her part, as they mostly do. Well, I suppose the trail's to be picked up again with a little trouble; but I think I'm bound to tell Mr. Collingham that I fancy a letter will reach her."

"Confound you! can't you look where you're going to?" exclaimed a man, angrily, who, coming sharp round a corner, ran into the meditative detective's arms. "Well, I'm blessed!" he ejaculated, on perceiving with whom he had come so abruptly into contact. "It's you again, is it? What the devil is it you're looking for up here?" and Mr. Lightfoot took a calm and deliberate survey of his opponent.

"Never you mind, and don't forget your manners because you live a little out in the suburbs," replied Bullock, tartly. "If it's any relief to your feelings, I'm not wanting you just now. I know all about you, and can put my finger on you any time, so you had better be uncommon careful not to overstep the limits of the law."

"That for your laws!" retorted Lightfoot, snapping his fingers; "anyone with a head on his shoulders can evade most of them. And you, my good friend, you positively believe you could find Leonidas Lightfoot, if it suited him to keep out of your way? That is too ridiculous. Bah! shall we have a friendly wager?"

"Take care," returned the detective, curtly. "You have slipped through my fingers twice. You won't find it so easy to do again. My chance will come. Men or your stamp never stop till they're laid by the heels. Mark me, Lightfoot, our next match means seven years

for you. You're clever and slippery, I grant you, but you all make an irretrievable mistake at last." And without awaiting further rejoinder, Mr. Bullock strode rapidly away.

Mr. Lightfoot was more put out by the detective's speech than he would have cared to own. With all his self-reliance and astuteness, with all his theories that they were but bunglers who came to grief and tribulation in preying upon their fellows, he could not but remember that the journals at intervals bore record of marauders, bold, clever, and unscrupulous as himself, who met their deserts, and found themselves powerless at last to escape the meshes of the law.

Bullock's words fell upon his ear like a knell, and even now he was unconsciously deciding to cross the path of that legalized sleuth-hound no more.

"What on earth brought him here, I wonder?" mused Mr. Lightfoot, as he bent his steps towards his lodgings. "Couldn't have been upon my account this time. Not much use, however, bothering my head about that. The question is, what this Cheslett girl has done with herself. It's too provoking! Here she's been, for the last five weeks, living under my nose, and disappears again just as I discover her whereabouts. If I had only worked out my own theory a trifle more promptly, I should have caught my bird. Now——" And Mr. Lightfoot shrugged his shoulders despondently as he rang his door-bell.

It must be borne in mind that he has no idea that Bullock is also engaged in seeking Lettice, although that distinguished officer is perfectly aware that he (Lightfoot) is interested in her discovery.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

“**I**T’S no use trying to humbug me, Mr. Collingham. You are not yourself, not by several inches. Now,” continued Miss Meggott, “it’s no use going on in this way, writing trash in the *Misanthrope*, and fretting and fidgeting as you do. Either go away to the sea, pitch pen and ink to Jericho, and kick up your heels; or, if you mean being ill, let’s begin at once, and let me take care of you.”

“Pooh! Polly, there’s not much the matter. I’m a little worried about things just now. However, a few days will probably see my troubles over.”

“Mind they do, or I shall either telegraph for Mr. Donaldson, or call in a doctor. I’m not going to have you going off with worrits, doldrums, or blue devils, on my hands, I can tell you,” retorted Miss Meggott, cheerily.

“Don’t be a fool, Polly,” interrupted Charlie, sharply.

“Not if I know it, my child; but the misfortune is, it’s so easy to be one unawares. It’s quite possible, you know, that may be your identical complaint at this moment!”

“’Pon my word I believe you’re right! I am worrying my soul out about two things which I fancy will all come square enough in the end.”

"If it's about your love affair you're fretting, I'm sure you need not. Pooh! don't look so astonished. Of course I know all about it. When you have so many photographs of one young lady tossing about, and get so many letters, all penned by the same feminine hand, it don't need a conjuror to tell what's the matter. Bless you, I cried my eyes out over your inconstancy three months ago!"

"You're letting your tongue run riot, Polly," returned Charlie, somewhat sharply; for much licence as he and Donaldson had always accorded Miss Meggott, he felt a little indignant at the thought of how thoroughly her keen black eyes had read him of late.

"Don't be angry, Mr. Collingham. You know I wouldn't willingly say anything to annoy you. But you are getting hipped—indeed you are. Take the latch-key, and go out for the evening. Even if you lose it, and I have to get up to let you in, I won't complain."

"Nonsense, Polly, I'm well enough, and have work to do to-night. I shall dine at home."

Charlie Collingham was much exercised in his mind about the state of things at Aldringham. Grace had informed him of her interview with her father—had told him that she was forbid to think of him as a lover, or to correspond with him in future.

"We can do nothing for the present, Charlie, but wait and hope," she wrote. "This must be my last letter, and I beg you not to answer it, as your handwriting would now be certain to attract my father's attention, and of course occasion me a severe lecture. Things are quite unpleasant enough now as they stand, without that addition, so we must for the present place implicit faith in each other, and hope for brighter days. As a proof of how thoroughly I do trust you, Charlie, I must tell you that Sir John himself declared to me the other day you were already married, and still I do not falter in my allegiance. I believe yet you will explain away all these rumours that now so torment me. Let it be as soon as possible, please, for I am sore tried, and find it hard to sit silent while Aldringham gossip is so busy with your name."

"Yes," he muttered, as he rose and paced the room restlessly, "there must be an end to all this, and that speedily. I had intended to wait till next year, when I should have been quite clear of those fetters I forged for myself in my college day—to wait till I was in receipt of that higher salary I am promised. But Grace can't be left down there to be bullied. Add to which, now old Holbourne has taken up this view of the case, and my respected father has thought proper to meddle in the matter, it's not likely I should find things run smooth for me then. The banker won't be much impressed with my rent-roll, when all's said and done." And Charlie smiled somewhat bitterly as he thought how limited his income would appear in Mr. Holbourne's eyes, even when his present hopes should be realized. "Nothing for it, Gracie, but to persuade you to run away and share my bread and cheese, as soon as may be. Now your father has assumed the *rôle* of the domestic tyrant, I feel no further compunctions. Better either give me up, or do it at once, than submit to the dragooning you are likely to undergo at home. Miss Langworthy, as things stand at present, is scarce likely to make your cross easier to bear. *Viva!* my mind's made up. Reginald, like myself, is at war with the authorities, and therefore fit aider and abettor in a scheme that sets them at defiance."

His dinner was soon despatched, and he betook himself once more to his work, but his usually facile pen refused to run freely. Sooth to say, he could not keep his mind from dwelling on whether he should be able to gain Grace's consent to the contemplated elopement. To think of one thing, and write of another, is not productive of very effective composition; and finding most irrelevant words continually cropping up in his manuscript, Charlie at last threw it upon one side, as labour not likely to be productive of a satisfactory result.

Besides, he expected Reginald Holbourne would look in shortly, to hear if there were any tidings of Lettice. There was plenty of fixity of purpose in Reginald just now. He blenched not an iota upon reading his father's letter. He had thoroughly made up his mind to marry Lettice, cost what it might, as soon as ever he should

find her, and treated his father's prohibition of his doing so with sullen indifference. This genuine love of his had much changed Reginald's character. Formerly he had been vacillating in mind, and somewhat addicted to sybaritism in practice. Now he was rigid, if taciturn, in performance of all duties required of him; a model of punctuality, and an untiring worker. He had acquired considerable praise for the dexterity and success with which he had managed the Frankfort mission, and the close attention he now devoted to business was winning him golden opinions in the eyes of the firm he served. Once released from the thralldom of Blisworth, Chantry and Company, and Reginald threw his whole energies into the search for Lettice. He had interviews with half-a-dozen people every night on the subject—people for the most part who had idly answered one or other of the advertisements, and whose wandering stories he listened to with scant patience. Though curious, it was trying. These folks for the most part were imbued with the idea that they conferred an extraordinary favour by bringing their worthless intelligence, and that a considerable honorarium would of course reward their desire to restore the young lady to her friends.

Still when a Mrs. Waters called upon Reginald to relate the story of how her cook had left her in a huff, and driven straight to Paddington Station with all her boxes; when Mrs. Fitzsmithers of the Alexandra Seminary for Young Ladies, Upper Clapton, dropped in to record the sudden disappearance of a pupil-teacher, after having been reprimanded (Upper Clapton, for having been snubbed and nagged at for six months), in no recognised direction; when Mrs. Macfungus, wife of the Low Church vicar of the adjoining parish, who had taken a young woman full of grace and oatmeal from the workhouse, with no character, and therefore extremely humble upon the subject of wages, looked in to mention the absence of this young woman, and some dozen or so fiddle-patterned silver spoons conjointly; then Reginald, as he came to undergo the task of listening to half-a-dozen such narratives a night, which narratives it was apparent, before half-a-score sentences had been

uttered could by no possible distortion be for one second deemed applicable to the case of Lettice as stated in the advertisements—then indeed Reginald would wax weary and hopeless. Fell and garrulous, too, were these dread female visitors. It surpassed the talent of man in this nineteenth century to put a check upon their tongues. The days of arbitrary translation to a dungeon or instant execution are gone, and Reginald finally found that the way to relieve himself from their presence was to preserve unbroken silence till they showed some symptoms of scarcity of breath, and then very shortly and brusquely to inform them that their information was worthless. It was true he had to face then all manners of application for reward—from neat hints to violent demands, from insinuations regarding the cab fare to querulous solicitation for defrayal of time and expenses.

Reginald too, himself, wandered purposeless about the streets—that is, if one is justified in calling such driftless wandering purposeless which hoped to achieve by accident what it despaired of doing by design. If he felt sad and weary at times, there was no despondency about him—he had no doubt about recovering Lettice eventually. The gay, light-hearted, easy-going youth had changed into a quiet, resolute, taciturn man, strong in the earnestness of his purpose, and striving with all his might to attain it. None had recognised the change in him more quickly than Charlie Collingham.

The door is thrown open, and Miss Meggott, somewhat abashed by Charlie's late rebuke, ushers in Reginald Holbourne, with a quietude very foreign to her usual volatile manner. Polly, with all her glibness of tongue, is quick to take a hint, and feels not a little discomposed at the idea that she should have let her freedom of speech carry her too far. In her way, she is very much attached to both her lodgers, and now fidgets about the room, putting things a little straight, in considerable contrition.

"You are not really angry with me, Mr. Collingham, for my nonsense?" she says, at length, as she brushes close by Charlie, under some pretence of setting his desk to rights, and her wicked black eyes look deprecatingly up at him.

"Of course not," he replied; "only bear in mind in future that's a subject admits of no chaff."

"Certainly not," replied Polly, gaily. "Thy word is law, my liege, and your slave would place her neck beneath your foot, if it would not be a somewhat troublesome performance for both parties. Hast any more requirements, O sun of the universe?"

"None, thanks," replied Collingham, laughing.

"Then, good night, gentlemen. May sweet dreams attend your slumbers, and your awaking be—be—be monstrous jolly!"

"Oh! Polly, what a miserable breakdown!"

"Never mind," retorted Miss Meggott, with a laugh and a wink, "the sentiment ain't bad, if not quite so poetically expressed as it might be. Once more good night, and et cetera be with you!"

"Now, Charlie," exclaimed Holbourne, impatiently, as the door closed upon Polly, "have you any news for me?"

"Well, I have, and I haven't. Both our emissaries have found Lettice Cheslett, only to lose her again immediately—or, to speak more correctly, have found where she fled to, just twenty-four hours or so after she had left the house."

"Go on," said Reginald.

"She went from Baker Street to John Street, Islington," continued Charlie, tersely, "and left that again yesterday afternoon. The people of the house say they don't know where for—Bullock says the landlady does, although she asserts she does not. Lightfoot merely reports that he traced her to that house, and is unable so far to say more than that she left it yesterday."

"But neither of them looks to much difficulty in tracing her now, do they?" inquired Reginald anxiously.

"No. Bullock I saw, Lightfoot wrote—there's his letter," said Charlie, tossing it across to his friend. "Both think it a bit of bad luck to have missed putting us in communication with her by such a little. But as they say, these slips will happen in all things of the kind. Bullock is impressed with the idea that the landlady knows where she has gone—a circumstance, as you

see, that Lightfoot makes no allusion to. At all events, the landlady volunteers to forward a letter, if she has an opportunity—and here I hold with Bullock, that she would not have undertaken that much unless she felt pretty sure that the opportunity would not be wanting.”

“I see,” said Reginald quickly. “Of course I shall send a note there; it can do no harm, and may reach her. Blundering fools the pair of them, or they would have found 32, John Street a few days earlier.”

“Hum, I don’t know. You see, it was so long before they were set to work that tracing Miss Cheslett became by no means easy. But I want to talk to you about my own affairs a little, Reginald.”

“Of course, what is it? When do you expect to hear from Bullock again?”

“Oh, in a few day. I told you the other day, you know, that I was engaged to Grace?”

“Yes, and I was delighted to hear it, old fellow.” As he spoke, Reginald Holbourne rose and began to pace the room restlessly. Now Collingham was seated in a low, lounging chair near the window, almost opposite the door. It was between these two points that Reginald commenced pacing up and down. As he returned from the door he paused opposite Charlie’s chair and jerked out interrogatively, “Expect to see Lightfoot first, eh?”

“No, probably not. But Grace writes me word to say that your father is somehow aware of the whole affair.”

“And that there’s an awful row in consequence, shouldn’t wonder,” remarked Holbourne, turning on his heel and resuming his deliberate tramp in the direction of the door.

“Yes, and that’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“I suppose you haven’t the faintest conjecture of where she’s gone now?” observed Reginald, pausing in his walk opposite Charlie’s chair.

“Gone! why where should she be gone?” responded the latter, in amazement. “She’s still at Aldringham.”

“Excuse me,” said Holbourne, after staring vaguely at him for a moment, “but I was thinking of Lettice.”

“And I was talking of Grace. What an owl you are!”

Reginald made no response, but slowly turned his steps towards the door.

"Well, your father's been going on outrageously, quite after the pattern of the vindictive parent of transpontine melodrama, and swears that he'll hear of nothing of the kind."

"I know ; he wrote me word so," replied Reginald, once more stopping, with his hands buried in his pockets, opposite his friend.

"The d—l he did ! " exclaimed Charlie in considerable astonishment.

"Oh, yes ; and said he should disinherit me, and all the rest of it."

"What, because I want to marry your sister ?"

"No, of course not. What a fool you are, Charlie ! Because I told him I meant to marry Lettice. Deuced odd where she can have gone to now ! I wonder why she left John Street," and Reginald turned abruptly on his heel, and recommenced his monotonous tramp.

"Listen to me, and for goodness sake don't let your wits go wool-gathering for five minutes, if you can help it. Your father has found out that I am engaged to Grace, and is not a whit better pleased than at discovering you were engaged to Lettice. Do you understand ?"

"Of course I do, and should before, if you had only spoken out, instead of talking about 'aware of the affair !' How was I to know you meant your affair ?"

"Well, he's made Grace promise not to correspond any more with me, and generally gives her to understand that the converse of his blessing will attend any nuptials contracted with myself. Pleasant that, for both of us, isn't it ?"

"Look here, Charlie," said Holbourne, as he dropped into a chair, "my governor, you know, is not a bad sort, but I'm afraid he's rather imitative. Now, an uncompromising father like yours, with 'a d—d disinheriting countenance,' is quite enough to demoralize the heads of families right through the country. Sir John has set 'em the example, and impressed with the manner in which he has discarded your noble self, the parents of the neighbourhood feel impelled to follow so meritorious an

example. Mutinous youth must be outlawed, and cursed with bell, book, and candle. They think of your governor's inexorable sternness, and murmur, 'Let's do't after the high Roman fashion,' and they do——"

"Go on," said Charlie, as the speaker paused. "Your exordium's all very well, but I want to hear what line of conduct you propose these outlawed children should follow."

"I've set you the example, Charlie, as your father has mine," replied Reginald, quietly. "I have told him frankly that I refuse to yield to him on this point. If I know anything of you, and you love Grace as she deserves to be loved, you won't give her up so easily."

"I'm not likely to do that without a hard fight," returned Collingham, slowly; and then staring moodily at the empty grate, he became lost in thought.

There was silence between them for some minutes. At last Charlie said, in low tones, glancing the while somewhat inquisitively at his companion's countenance,

"Did you ever hear that I was married?"

"Yes, often; but have ever looked upon it as sheer Aldringham gossip. What do you mean?" And Reginald, in his turn, looked enquiringly at his host.

"It is true, all the same. I took precisely the line of conduct you are about to take. I married in defiance of Sir John. He put forth exactly your father's present programme if I ventured to disobey him; and has carried it out to the letter, as you know."

"But you haven't a wife now?"

"No, poor child, she was not with me long. She died within the year. She was a good little thing, made light of the roughing we had to endure in those early days, and was always gay as a lark in our scrambling home. You can't think what a hopeless, purposeless beast I was for a twelvemonth afterwards. There seemed nothing worth living for, and as long as I earned bread and cheese I didn't feel that I cared about doing much more. One thing only occurred to me, and that was to conceal my loss from Sir John. I raged against the world, Regi, in my sorrow, and somehow connected my father's treatment of me with my wife's death. Of course, really, that had nothing

to do with it. We were poor, certainly, but never in grievous straits. Still at the time I thought bitterly, had I been able to send her down to Churton for change of air, she might have been saved. So impressed was I with this idea that I wrote to my father, and pleaded hard for forgiveness, for the sake of my sick wife."

"And Sir John?" inquired Reginald, as his friend paused in dreamy remembrance of those bygone days of sorrow and suffering.

"Never answered my letter," said Charlie, briefly; and as he spoke, his face hardened, and his dark eyes gleamed fiercely on his questioner.

"I can hardly wonder now that you have never come together again."

"You would deem it strange if we had, I should think, with that grave still lying green between us," replied Charlie, hoarsely. "But what I want to ask you is this: if I can persuade Gracie to marry me without her father's consent, will you countenance our wedding—be at it—give your sister away, &c.?"

"Yes. I can form some idea of what domestic discipline poor Gracie will undergo on your behalf. Charlie, if you really care for her—and I am sure you do—run away with her at once. If my advice is not filial, I know it's fraternal."

"Yes, in every sense of the word. If we have any luck, old fellow, we might make a double marriage of it."

"Perhaps so. Let me know the moment you have news for me; and now good night."

Charlie remained lost in tobacco and meditation for nearly half-an-hour after Reginald left him. "Yes," he muttered, as he knocked the ashes from his pipe "if I can but induce Gracie to listen to reason, the affair will be easy enough."





CHAPTER XXXIV.

STRUCK DOWN.

THE warm September afternoon has grown still more sultry as it verges to a conclusion; the sun descends slowly behind a bank of ominous clouds, to whose outer edges he imparts a copper-coloured tinge. The stillness of the evening is almost oppressive; all animated nature seems exhausted. The sheep and cattle gather beneath the trees or hedges, in anticipation of the threatening outburst. In the villages men loll listlessly in their shirt-sleeves around their door-sills, and opine there will be "a goodish sup of rain before morning." The birds seek their roosting places with low querulous twittering; even the boys and puppies seem awed into quietude.

Mr. Holbourne's carriage, as it whirls into Aldringham, seems the sole thing astir along the dusty road. The horses are flecked with foam, although the coachman is driving leisurely. Both he and the footman are powdered heavily with dust, and consumed with a desire for beer. Through the hot empty streets they proceed at a sedate pace, while the populace languidly take note of them from window and doorstep—some of them, indeed, interchanging feeble nods with the dust-covered servitors on the box. Usually the appearance of the Churton carriage would have given rise to speculation as to what gave occasion for its presence, but this evening it was too hot.

Men could but listen to the faint, far-off rumbling of the approaching storm, and wish that the rain might descend speedily and clear the air.

The carriage makes its way to the railway, and there pulls up. The footman goes inside, and establishes himself upon the down platform, and has barely done so five minutes when the shrill whistle of the approaching train rings out loud and clear; another minute or two, and it glides quietly within the station. A slight girlish figure, with pale face, and draped in deep mourning, descends from one of the carriages, and having claimed her luggage, looks timidly around, and then inquires if there is anything to meet her from Sir John Collingham's.

"Yes, miss," replies the porter, "Sir John's carriage is here; that's his servant."

The tall footman advances at this, and touching his hat says, inquiringly, "Miss Melton?"

Lettice bowed assent.

"The carriage is outside, Miss," continues that functionary; "and Miss Collingham trusts you will excuse her not meeting you herself, as she is not very well to-day. Are these all your things, Miss?"

Lettice responds in the affirmative. A few seconds more, and she and her belongings are on their road to Churton. As they drive through Aldringham, it becomes apparent that the storm, which has been threatening for some hours, is on the verge of breaking. The stillness is at last broken, and the wind sighs through the streets with long, sonorous moan, pauses for a few seconds, and then again sighs more tumultuously, ending with a faint, spasmodic shriek; the thunder growls deep and sullenly with ever-increasing roar, and a few big plashes of rain spatter the pavement. The coachman drops his whip sharply across his horses, and rattles out of the town at a pace considerably in excess of that at which he so leisurely entered it a short half-hour ago.

It is an open carriage, and Lettice cowers down amongst her rugs and wraps as the rain begins to descend in earnest, while the lightening flashes luridly across the now darkened sky, and the ominous roll of the thunder

deepens into the similitude of fierce salvoes of artillery. The girl's heart sinks within her as the pitiless storm beats savagely in her face. The coachman pulls up for a second, and the footman, jumping down, covers her up with an extra rug, and remarks he's afraid Miss Collingham will be very angry that they didn't bring the brougham; but they never thought it would be like this. He scrambles up to his place, and on they speed again.

Very sad feels Lettice. For the first time in her life she is going to earn her bread among strangers. The dispelling of her love-dream has left a sore gnawing at her heart-strings, and she grieves bitterly over the thought that she and Reginald are severed for life. She is getting rapidly drenched by the rain, despite her wraps. She is frightened at the thunder, and even more so at the thought of encountering these strangers with whom her lot is now to be cast; she feels that she should like to indulge in a good cry better than anything. She knows next to nothing about these people with whom she is going to live; she is engaged as a companion to a young lady, is all she has been told. The especial qualifications required of her are that she should read well and be able to play; and on this latter subject Lettice is oppressed with most terrible misgivings, for she knows that her performance on the piano is by no means to be regarded as brilliant, and that she is somewhat guilty of presumption in stating that she is qualified in that respect.

Still it was necessary that she should turn her hand to something. Her old friend Mrs. Bopps had answered this advertisement for her, and strongly urged her to try it. "Ladies who have been out before objected to," said the notice in question. "So, my dear, they can't expect to find you a past mistress on the instrument," urged the friendly landlady; "not but what you play very nicely, I think, and it's no use being diffident in this world."

And so it was that Miss Melton (to call her by her proper name), closed with Sir John Collingham's advertisement, and was at this present wending her way through rain and thunder to Churton.

Drenched, sad, and desolate was Lettice as the carriage pulled up. Shivering, and with chattering teeth, she entered the big hall, feeling more forlorn and miserable, perhaps, than she had ever yet felt in the course of her life.

But a door is thrown suddenly open, admitting a stream of light into the half illuminated hall, and a tall, elderly man in evening costume comes quickly forward, and taking her hand in his, exclaims,

"Welcome to Churton, Miss Melton! Good heavens! you are wet through! The accursed fools must have taken an open carriage for you instead of the brougham! Sylla, my love, come here and take care of your friend. She's half drowned, thanks to that idiot Jenkins! I must tell him a bit of my mind at once;" and the Baronet strode off in a paroxysm of wrath, such paroxysms being by no means rare with Sir John, and woefully dreaded by his household.

Almost as her father spoke Sylla glided into the hall, advanced to within a few steps of Lettice, and stopped. Lettice felt much confused as this fair-haired, delicate complexioned young lady stood apparently contemplating her with cool, deliberate stare.

"Miss Melton, she said, in a quiet, musical voice, "you must come to me, please. I can't see you, you know."

Now this was precisely what Lettice did not know. No intimation had been given her that the lady to whom she was to be companion was blind. It was little likely that she should discover it in that half-lit hall. She came forward a pace or two, and then paused, shrinking and bewildered.

"Give me your hand," said Sylla, "and let me take you upstairs to get rid of your wet things."

It was all a mystery so far, and she regarded Miss Collingham with no little awe; but, obedient to her commands, Lettice extended her hand, and was somewhat surprised at the warmth with which Sylla's slender white fingers clasped it.

"You are wet, and chilled to death!" cried Miss Collingham. "Come along; we must take care of you."

Lettice followed her hostess in mute astonishment as

she threaded her way across a passage or two, and then ascended the stairs. So far there was no difficulty, but when Sylla, throwing open a door, and exclaiming, "Here's my own den; come in and let's see what we can do to warm and comfort you," passed into an unlit room, Lettice paused at the threshold, somewhat puzzled.

"Ah! stand still!" cried Sylla, "till I light the candles for you;" as her quick ear detected the cessation of her companion's footsteps. "I forgot for the moment there were no lights here. I am cut off from much that makes light so sweet to us; but you see I have the advantage of you at times."

More bewildered than ever, Lettice entered the boudoir. She could not understand her hostess in the least. But she soon comprehended the womanly kindness with which her wet things were taken from her. In five minutes, Sylla, assisted by her maid, had divested Lettice of her upper garments, and the latter, robed in one of Miss Collingham's dressing-gowns, her feet thrust into Miss Collingham's slippers, was sipping hot wine and water while her own boxes were being unpacked. Still not a suspicion of the truth crossed Lettice's mind; and when Sylla, consigning her to the hands of her maid, bade her be quick, and not waste much time upon her toilette, as dinner waited, Lettice had still no idea that Miss Collingham's eyes were shrouded in eternal darkness.

Even dinner did not reveal the fact. Sir John rattled pleasantly on in conversation with his daughter, albeit he by no means forgot to introduce a courteous observation occasionally to her companion. But Lettice was shy and nervous, responded briefly, and kept her eyes so riveted on her plate that it was little wonder she did not penetrate Sylla's affliction. Robert Collingham, too, made some slight effort to talk to her; but Lettice was rendered so palpably uncomfortable by these attempts that he good-naturedly desisted, and left his frightened *vis-à-vis* to her own devices.

"Come and sit here," said Sylla, as they entered the drawing-room—"I want to know you. Down, Dandy!—where have you been, sir? Why weren't you at

dinner? Miss Melton, I must present you to one of my greatest friends."

The dog seemed most perfectly to comprehend his mistress's remark. He wagged his tail, walked gravely up to Lettice, and thrust his nose into her hand, finally acknowledging her timid caress by placing a paw upon her lap.

"Ah! Dandy approves of you, Miss Melton, and that is by no means what he does of everyone who comes to see me. He is most capricious in his likes and dislikes. You will think me very foolish, but I have great respect for Dandy's judgment. And now, you must not think me rude, but tell me a little what you are like—whether dark or fair?"

Lettice opened her eyes in dismay. What was she to think of all this? Miss Melton hazarded a glance at her companion, whom she now deemed mentally afflicted, and replied quietly.

"I am such as you see me. It would be presumption and foolishness to describe myself to you."

"What! haven't they told you? Have you not yet discovered it? It was a mistake of my father not to have communicated my misfortune to you," said Sylla, gently. "I trust you will see my question is not so rude as I fear you think it, when I tell you that I am blind."

Lettice started, and then gazed in mute astonishment into her companion's face. The fixity of the pale blue eyes that were turned towards her riveted her attention at once. She read the truth in their calm, passionless stare, looking, as it seemed to her, into some far-off future. Though turned towards her, she saw that they were not actually directed to her own countenance. A great awe fell upon Lettice as she recognised that this brilliantly-dressed woman who sat beside her was bereft of sight.

"I beg your pardon—I am so sorry," she whispered, stealing her hand into Sylla's "I didn't know—nobody told me. I will do anything you like. I would be a friend to you, if I may."

"You may, and you must," replied Miss Collingham, as she pressed the little hand within her own warmly,

and a bright smile flashed across her face. "I feel I shall like you, and my instincts, like Dandy's, seldom mislead me. God is good to me, and makes up for my deprivation in one way by sharpening my faculties in others. I judge people, now, a good deal by their voice. It seldom misleads me, and yours tell me we shall be great friends. Now, won't you enlighten me a wee bit about yourself?"

Lettice had never known what it was to have a female friend since the marriage of her sister, and that had taken place when she was too young to think much of such things—when her confidences related to juvenile scrapes and the woes of her doll; though even in those days she had been but little given to such childish diversions. The business of life had, in a manner, begun early for Lettice, and she had been installed housekeeper by her grandfather ere she was well clear of the nursery.

Quietly Lettice told her simple story; how she and her sister had been left orphans, and had been brought up by her grandfather; how her sister had married and died, all within a year; how the death of her grandfather had left her all alone in the world; how she had first proposed to get her living by needlework; and how, at her landlady's suggestion, she had answered Sir John's advertisement. "I can read aloud," she added naively, in conclusion—"I mean I have been really taught; and, if you only think I play well enough, Miss Collingham, I can be of use to you, I know."

"You will be everything I wish, I'm sure," returned Sylla. "And now, child, what between your journey and your drenching, I daresay you would like to go to bed."

When Lettice woke the next morning, it was with a dull, oppressed feeling in her head. She felt somewhat confused, and it required all the resolution she could muster to rise. This produced so violent a fit of shivering, and her brain swam to such a degree, that she was speedily compelled to crawl back to bed again. When Miss Collingham's maid, despatched by her mistress, at length came to look after her, Lettice could only murmur that she felt very unwell. This speedily produced a visit from Sylla, who had no sooner passed her

cool hand over Lettice's burning brow than she directed the doctor should be sent for. That functionary, upon his arrival, intimated that he had not been summoned a moment too soon.

"The girl is in a high fever, Miss Collingham, and what course it may run is, at present, impossible to determine. But the young lady is very seriously ill, and requires most careful tending—may, very likely, be in danger two or three days hence."

"I will be answerable for the nursing, doctor, only give me my instructions. She got wet coming here last night, which is, I presume, the proximate cause of her illness?"

"Yes, that would be perhaps the immediate reason, but this fever has been lurking in the system some weeks past, I should judge from the violence with which it has broke forth. Fevers do at times lie locked in the system like foul gases in a cellar, to be either dissipated by change of air and scene, or exploded by something that acts towards them like the candle to the confined vapour."

The doctor was so far right. Before three days were over, Lettice's situation was critical. The rich dark tresses were shorn from her head, the black fever-lit eyes gleamed wild with delirium, and as the girl tossed incessantly upon her pillow, the poor parched lips poured forth a torrent of incoherent babble. Sylla and her attendants watched over the sick-bed with unremitting vigilance. What help careful nursing might give her in her necessity that Lettice had. Miss Collingham often spent hours by her side, and despite her infirmity, there were few defter nurses than Sylla.

The spell exercised by such quiet noiseless ministration, the soothing afforded by such light delicate fingers, is comprehended only by those who have looked far down the shadows of the valley of death.

Much raved the girl in her delirium of Reginald. Constant were her appeals to him to protect her from some vague impending evil. She wailed feebly that he had left her to bear alone the brunt of some woman's bitter tongue. "Come back, oh! come back," she would cry, "if you love me, and testify how false is her accusation—" "No," she would exclaim at times fiercely, "it

is not so, and you know it. Ah ! if Reginald were but here, you wicked woman ! But he is not, and I shall never see him more ! ” And then the poor wearied brain would wander again, and inquire querulously for that dead sister and Charlie.

The crisis is near at hand, the doctor says. If his patient fails to get sleep in the next twenty-four hours, she will succumb to the violence of the disease. Sylla sits motionless by the bedside, while the luckless girl tosses restlessly on her pillow. Her maid glides into the room and whispers that Miss Holbourne wishes to see her.

“ I can’t leave this ; tell Miss Holbourne to come to me here,” replies Miss Collingham in a low voice.

A few minutes, and Gracie steals in and embraces her friend.

“ I don’t like to leave her,” said Sylla, speaking under her breath. “ Poor thing, it is pitiable to hear her ! She is moderately quiet just now, but the doctor says she must sleep or die. It is shocking to listen to her wanderings, poor child. She seems ever in terror of some nameless woman.

Miss Holbourne leant noiselessly over the bed and gazed at the sufferer. She marked the drawn pallid cheeks, the parched twitching lips, took note of the long dark lashes that veiled the closed eyes ; and as she gazed, Grace sighed sadly, and thought how fair to look upon that face must have been in health, retaining as it still did a species of weird beauty, despite the fell ravings of the fever. Suddenly the lids were lifted, and the big dark eyes gleamed fiercely up in Miss Holbourne’s face. They dilated as they did so, and Lettice strove hard to raise herself in her bed.

“ Slanderer !—traducer ! ” she shrieked, “ will you never leave me ? You have slain my fair fame—am I never to escape you ? I have done what you demanded. I have sacrificed all that made life worth having, at your bidding. Will you dog me with your hideous calumny to my grave ? Have you no mercy ? Ah ? pity,” she continued, as the wild shriek of her first words died away to a low, plaintive moan—“ I cannot tear him from my

heart. Save me, Reginald! I have tried so hard, and she persecutes me still! My love, my own, I cannot give you up! Go, you terrify me!—your looks kill me! Reginald, my darling, why are you not here?" She paused, and cowered down amid the bed-clothes in apparent terror. Grace, inexpressibly shocked, made a slight movement to withdraw. It attracted Lettice's attention. Raising herself by a supreme effort, her eyes glittering with wild excitement, she cried, "I can bear it no longer! I renounce my promise—I refuse to yield him to you! Reginald Holbourne, stand between that woman and me, or I shall die!" And, with a cry of anguish, Lettice fell back on her pillow motionless, and, to all appearance, lifeless.

The astonishment of the two girls at hearing Reginald Holbourne's name was unbounded. Sylla, it need be scarcely observed, had never connected the unknown Reginald of her patient's ravings with the banker's son.

"Go, Gracie, quick!" she exclaimed; "I will come to you in a few minutes. It is very unfortunate, but she evidently takes you for somebody else. It might excite her again if she should happen to see you here when she revives."

But Lettice speedily recovered from her half-swoon, and once more tossed restlessly on her pillow. The wan, feeble hands now fretted impatiently about her head.

"I can't find it, Reginald," she murmured—"I don't know what's become of my hair. No, one tress is enough for you. No, no," she whispered—"don't, dear, I'm so tired." For a few minutes she continued to mutter incoherently, and then, in awe-stricken tones, exclaimed, "Dead!—dead! Charlie, you frighten me! Ah me! all alone—all alone!" Then, for a time, the poor fevered brain ceased from its troublous working, and Lettice lay comparatively still.

"She's not asleep yet, Harriet," said Miss Collingham, softly, to her maid, "but she is so much quieter that I trust she may be before long. Watch by her till I come back." And Sylla made her way rapidly downstairs.

There, as may be supposed, the two girls speculated

much as to what relation the sick girl stood in to Reginald. She had uttered the name quite distinctly, and appealed to him to protect her from some unknown woman. The terms of endearment which had escaped her concerning him, left little doubt that there had been love-passages between them.

"Who is she, Sylla?" inquired Miss Holbourne.

"My dear Gracie, I know very little about her. I have taken a great fancy to her, considering how slight my knowledge of her really is. This is what she told me of herself—" And here Sylla narrated Lettice's history, as far as she knew it.

"She never mentioned my brother's name before?" inquired Miss Holbourne, musingly.

"No, but she was not likely to give me her whole confidence in one evening. I can't think her reticent about her past life, considering, poor thing, the short time that was vouchsafed her to throw light upon it."

"I suppose not. However, we must wait till either she or Reginald choose to explain matters to us. That they have been lovers at some time seems pretty clear. Good-bye, Sylla, I hope your patient may mend before morning."

Who was this girl that had dropped from the clouds, and spoke in such fond terms of her brother? mused Miss Holbourne, as she drove homewards.





CHAPTER XXXV

CHARLIE'S STORY.

“THE ways of women are inscrutable to masculine understandings,” quoth Mr. Lightfoot, meditatively. “As far as my knowledge of the sex goes, they seem always bound to do the last thing you would expect of them. You may draw a fair deduction of what course a man may take under given circumstances, but as for predicting what it may occur to a woman to do in a similar case would be a problem that would simply convince Solomon of the futility of wordly experience.”

“What’s the matter, Leo?” inquired his wife—“what puzzles you now?”

“Miss Cheslett is the matter, and what has taken her to Aldringham is the thing that puzzles me. I understand what made her leave Baker Street—I understand what brought her to Islington—but why she has gone to Aldringham beats me. She must know that Miss Langworthy lives there, and she should know that her lover does not. She can’t have gone down there to confront the woman who, I presume, drove her away from her old lodgings. Why did she go? It is the last thing I should have suspected her of doing.”

“You are, of course, sure she has gone there?” inquired his partner.

“Sure as one can be without going down to see. I

have ascertained that she drove to King's Cross Station, and that a young lady in deep mourning, corresponding to her in every respect, took a ticket for that place. Yes, I have not much doubt about her having gone there."

Looked upon from Mr. Lightfoot's point of view, it did seem strange what had induced Lettice to betake herself to Aldringham. Not a whit less puzzled were Collingham and Reginald Holbourne, when apprised of the fact, and but for Charlie's more prudent counsels, Reginald would have at once started off in search of her. But he yielded at last, and it was finally settled that the inquiry should be left to the versatile Lightfoot, who, upon this occasion, had forestalled his rival, Bullock, by some hours in his information. The latter was dismissed with a handsome *douceur*, and a diplomatic intimation from Collingham that his services were no further required, as they had discovered Miss Cheslett's whereabouts from other sources. Charlie knew something of the detective's enmity towards Lightfoot, and was very careful not to inform him of that gentleman's being also engaged in the affair.

"It's been rather an awkward business to work out," said Mr. Bullock, "but it's all plain sailing now; and of course, as you've heard of the young lady in other ways, it's no use my running down to Aldringham. Much obliged, sir," and the detective touched his hat and departed.

"It's very strange," said Reginald, for about the twentieth time, as he sat in Charlie's rooms smoking, after the fashion of a perfect neophyte in the use of tobacco. He consumed his cigars at this time apparently as much by mastication as by legitimate smoking, and was wont to chew them, and send forth volumes of vapour in a fashion held highly indecorous by all votaries of nicotine. In his present state of feverish excitement, Reginald was scarce conscious of what he did. I have heard the story of a man, temperate enough in his usual way, who, in the excitement of a contested election at a meeting of his supporters, finished a bottle of sherry. In the heat of that fiery speechifying, he recked little what

he was doing, and indignantly denied that he had swallowed even a glass, when laughingly taxed with the performance. He was as utterly oblivious of what he had done, and as perfectly unaffected thereby, as if that decanter had never been there.

Reginald at this time is in a similar strait. He eats, smokes, drinks mechanically; in his fierce excitement about Lettice he is almost unconscious of those commonplace functions of life. In the City only does he gain any respite; there the work takes him for the time out of himself, and he throws himself into it with a savage energy and indifference to the quantity, that astonishes his compeers, who a few months back reckoned him by no means a toiler in the hive—viewed him, indeed, as one whose bread was already well buttered, and who was perfectly aware of the fact. But a strong passion has made and marred many a man. In Reginald's case it seems likely to be the making of him; but even Charlie Collingham looks with some dismay upon his friend's worn, haggard countenance. Amusements of all kinds—theatres, parties, dinners—Reginald rejects. He lives but for two things—the discovery of Lettice and to push his way in the City. Questioned closely by Charlie, he admits that he sleeps badly, that he hates going to bed, and is ready to leave it as soon as may be, that he eats little, but lives a good deal upon tobacco and stimulants.

Contemplating him worrying (there is no other term for it) the cabana between his lips this evening, Charlie comes to the conclusion that his friend cannot last much longer on his present diet.

"It's very strange," resumed Reginald, dreamily. "I can't conceive what has taken Lettice down to Aldringham."

"Did she know your people lived there?" inquired his companion.

"She might, but it is very doubtful. I never said much to her on the subject of my relations; further than that my father was a country banker, I don't think she knew anything about my belongings."

"Did you know anything of hers?" asked Charlie, slowly.

"She had none but the old man who died, and a brother-in-law long lost sight of."

Do not think that either of the young men had overlooked the fact that it was very possible Lettice might have to earn her bread, but it never occurred to either of them that she could have gone to Aldringham in pursuit of it. Her last letter nearly to Reginald had talked of this probability, and he had heard nothing that led him to believe that Mr. Cheslett had left any money behind him; in fact, Reginald had strong reason for thinking that Lettice was in embarrassed circumstances.

"Reginald," said Charlie, "don't think that I have behaved badly, because it is not altogether my fault, as it happens, but I am that brother-in-law."

"You!" exclaimed Holbourne. "Good heavens! you don't mean to say that you married Lettice Cheslett's sister!"

"Her name is not Cheslett; but I married Lettice's sister. Listen, Regi, and I'll tell you the whole story; don't interrupt me till I have done." He rose from his seat as he spoke, leant upon the mantelpiece for a few moments, and then commenced: "I am fond of a theatre now, but in my Oxford days I was wild about the business. I belonged to the 'Shooting Stars,' and was voted by no means bad for an amateur—indeed, in my innermost heart I thought that I could have made my way, and taken a very respectable position in the profession. I need scarcely say I don't think so now. Well, of course I was always acting, doing manager, stage-manager—in short, promoting amateur theatricals continually. The engaging of professional actresses was constantly left to me. It happened in my early days of theatrical devotion that I made the acquaintance of Miss Melton; she came down from town to assist at some performances I took part in at Bigminsthorpe. A slight flirtation sprang up between us, and as the engaging of ladies time after time was either placed in my hands, or conducted under my auspices, I took very good care that Miss Melton should be always bespoken. Our flirtation deepened and deepened, until it got very far beyond flirtation, and we were both as much in love as it is well possible to be. I

was now incessantly running up from Oxford to see Lilian Melton. Finally, we got engaged to each other, with very undefined views as to what was to come of it. She was an actress at an East-end theatre, and I an Oxford undergraduate. It did not seem probable that our marriage was near at hand, and I don't think either Lilian or I ever contemplated the solemnization of that event until some dim remote period. We were both young, dreadfully in love, managed to see each other pretty often, and thought things altogether were so roseate that we were in no particular hurry to break the spell that lay over us at the time.

"As you know," said Charlie, with a faint smile, "there's always a bad fairy—an unpropitiated magician or affronted sprite mixed up in all youthful love tales. Well, some one of these brought the deluge upon our heads in the shape of Sir John. He was furnished with what I deemed at the time a most calumnious version of my love affair. He interfered in his most despotical manner, stigmatised me as a fool, and poor Lilian as something much worse. I won't allude further to the foul charge he brought against her, beyond mentioning that months afterwards I found out that there was a Miss Melton of the West-end as well as the East—that the former drove exceedingly pretty ponies in the Park, and enjoyed a reputation by no means doubtful, and that I firmly believe my father confounded her with my affianced bride.

"My temper is somewhat like my father's. I was furious at his autocratic commands to myself—I was still more indignant at the scandalous terms in which he spoke of Lilian. My answer was couched in language by no means conciliatory. A short but violent correspondence ensued. Finally, Sir John informed me that if I presumed to contract this marriage, he discarded me from that time, that he would hold communication with me neither by word nor letter, that not a shilling he could alienate from me should ever be mine, that he should forbid me to set foot in Churton, and that any servant who connived at my doing so would be instantly discharged."

Charlie paused for a moment and gazed keenly at his

auditor. No need to ask if Holbourne was interested. His blue eyes were riveted on his companion's face.

"I am not of the kind," continued Collingham, "that bow meekly to such arbitrary decisions. I was very much in love, and frantic with indignation at the unjust aspersions cast upon Lilian. My answer was curt. I informed him that I should forward a copy of the certificate of my marriage to him within a fortnight, and I did. With that one exception, at the ball, I have never seen my father since, nor has but one letter ever passed between us. So sore was I with him and the world generally, that when my poor wife was taken from me some months afterwards, I took especial precautions to prevent the intelligence reaching Sir John's ears."

"But how came it," inquired Reginald, eagerly, "that you so totally lost sight of Lettice?"

"That is easily explained," replied Charlie. "If old Cheslett never strenuously opposed, he at all events never cordially approved my marriage with his grand-daughter. He knew I had quarrelled with my father, he knew that my private means were very moderate—a bare three hundred a year, that I inherited on coming of age from my mother, consequently I represented a needy man. Now the old gentleman, it has always been my belief, was much better off than he affected to be. I fancy his son-in-law, John Melton, a scapegrace doctor, from all I have been able to pick up, tugged hard at his purse-strings during his brief existence. The old man was at heart a miser, and he was terribly apprehensive that I should prove a similar blood-sucker. I never asked him for a shilling, but during my wife's lifetime I don't believe he ever saw me without dreading that I should apply to him for money. He knew I must be hard put to it to get along; and Lilian's father had taught him that in such case he was likely to be urgently appealed to. He eschewed all his relations from similar reasons. While my wife lived, it was impossible to conceal his residence from us, though I think he never saw me without a shudder of apprehension on that point. But no sooner was she dead, than he abruptly left his old lodgings, and where he went I never guessed, until you told me your

story. I have no doubt he purposely cut off all clue to his abode, from that shadowy suspicion that I might at some time prove importunate, and clamour for assistance."

"Then you don't think Lettice is left destitute?"

"I can't say about that, but I have no doubt her grandfather has left money behind him. Whether to her or not, is an open question; but one would think, if he made a will at all, that she would most likely benefit. Those papers, poor child, she complained to you that she could not understand, would probably prove simple of comprehension to a man of business."

They both remained silent for some minutes. Reginald was lost in meditation on his friend's story. It was so odd, he thought, that Charlie should have known all about these people so long. At last he said abruptly,

"Then if you had chanced to meet Lettice that time you came to my rooms before the Aldringham ball, you would have recognised her?"

"Most likely. At all events, she would certainly have known me. They were living there then, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, though I didn't know them at that time. By the way, what was Cheslett?"

"An actor, but not a very distinguished one. His speciality was stage management. He was of the old school, and terribly adverse to much outlay on scenery or dresses. They did not lie altogether in his control, or there would have been slight expense gone to in that respect. He used to drive dramatic authors wild by his objections to the outlay necessary for the production of their effects. A sensational drama of the present day he would probably have pronounced ruinous, even if practicable, to place on the boards. Runs of a hundred nights were before his time, and what stage machinery is capable of at present not even dreamt of."

"It is queer," remarked Holbourne, at length, "that you should turn out to be Lettice's brother-in-law, and, what's more, I fancy her nearest relative to boot."

"Probably; but I must get to work again. That," he said, pointing vaguely to some loose manuscript upon

his desk, "must be finished before I go to bed. If you hear me spoken of as a married man in future, you know now how much of truth is contained in the assertion. If, in consequence of my relations with your sister, you feel it imperative on some occasion to deny the fact, I would prefer your confining yourself simply to the denial, and not going into explanation concerning it without consulting me. But I have no wish to bind you to this remember, should you deem the narration of the whole story a necessity."

Reginald nodded good night, and strode off in the direction of his rooms, in a more jubilant frame of mind than he had known for some weeks.





CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN ELOPEMENT.

MISS LANGWORTHY has resumed her pet *rôle*, meanwhile, of martyred innocence, with all conceivable gusto. Young ladies, when jilted, as a rule rather emulate the stoicism of the Indians, wear a stiff upper lip, and strive to conceal their sufferings. To make parade of woe on such occasion would be generally stigmatized by the sex as showing a great want of proper spirit. But Miss Langworthy had not much reverence for her sisters' theories in such cases. She at all events played her own game with most contemptuous disregard of the conventionalities. She took care that Aldringham should be informed of how shamefully she had been thrown over by her cousin. She affected even sombre raiment. Her manner and voice were subdued. Aldringham society, in little more than a week, was in sympathetic *rappor*t with Miss Langworthy, and regarded Reginald Holbourne as an abandoned profligate.

"How beautifully she takes it, poor thing! though it is easy to see how her heart is wrung by such shameful desertion," chorussed the ladies.

"Got himself into a deuce of a mess with some girl or other," muttered the men. "Had to break with his cousin, or this other vowed she would bring an action for breach of promise at once, and no nonsense about it!"

"Worse than that, sir, a deal," remarked that lugubrious leaven of quidnuncs with which all society is tinged. They seldom commit themselves to more than such indefinite accusation, but they waggle their malevolent old heads, and maunder on: "It's not for them to say. What has come to their ears perhaps, after all, may never leak out. They are not ill-natured, and trust it may not, if only for his father's sake." More detrimental to an assailed character, by far, these vapoury insinuations, than most scandalous accusations directly alleged.

All this brought but slight relief to bonnie Grace Holbourne. If she was spared further stories of her lover's wrong-doing, it was only to hear garbled reports of her brother's offending. She had ascertained without doubt from her father that Reginald's engagement with Marion was at an end, but beyond an intimation that her brother had behaved badly and contemplated behaving worse, Grace knew nothing. That his plighted troth to his cousin was a mistake had long been visible to her; but that Marion should make this display of acutely feeling the severance of that tie puzzled her much. She knew perfectly well that Miss Langworthy cared nothing about her brother; she thought over that affair of Robert Collingham's, and felt perfectly assured that her cousin would have said yes had the chance been vouchsafed her. And inwardly Grace thought what a deal of annoyance it would have spared her and Reginald if Robert Collingham had but knelt at her cousin's feet instead of her own.

Miss Langworthy, meanwhile, seems determined on mourning this dead love; dead, ay, how far back on both sides!—and she enacts the part to perfection. In her assumed sadness she contrives to throw a gloom over the whole house! she pleads want of spirits to whatever her uncle may propose in the way of entertainment, and succeeds in enveloping both him and Grace in her own mock mourning.

The banker waxes fretful and irritable under this treatment; he puts his discomfort all down to the perversity of his self-willed children; he snubs his daughter and

pets his niece, and imitating Sir John, whom he much reveres, desires Reginald's name may not be mentioned in his presence. This edict is fulminated with considerable nervous trepidation and much flourishing of the eye-glass. Grace takes up the cudgels for her brother with considerable spirit, but is peremptorily put down, and informed that her own conduct is pretty nearly as undutiful. Marion, while gently deprecating the sentence, dexterously fans the flame of Mr. Holbourne's wrath.

"Pray, pray don't be hard on Reginald, uncle," she said in her most mellifluous tones. "He has not treated me very well; never mind that—I can bear my own troubles; but I should be loth to hear you threaten him with punishment on my account. I loved him well while he would let me, and am but justly punished for not insisting that your consent should have been asked to our engagement in the first instance."

Mr. Holbourne only stormed the more. Persecution of the offender seemed like the dispensing of simple justice. The banker hardened his heart against his children, and felt that he approximated to his pet model, Sir John Collingham, the more he stifled his natural feelings.

But Mr. Holbourne was very uneasy in his new character. He had always been a most indulgent parent, and was of naturally warm affections; he was essentially a domestic, home-loving man, and the discomfort of his hearth weighed heavily on his soul. It was all very well for Sir John, a man of iron will and granite disposition, to curse and cast off a son who had disobeyed him; but the banker's temperament was no tougher than cheese. He carried his family troubles about with him; he began to falter in his pompous assurance; he had let slip one or two opportunities of airing his eloquence of late; the gold eye-glass waxed feeble in its domineering flourishes; in short, to close observers it became evident that the banker was uneasy in his mind. The gossiping little town began to take note of all these things. The disgraceful conduct of his son served to explain the change in Mr. Holbourne's demeanour for a little, but

ere long Aldringham began to whisper, with bated breath, of disastrous speculations. It is well in such places to announce publicly when your liver should be out of order, lest observations detrimental to your solvency or moral character should gain ground consequent on your depression of spirits.

There was no reason from which to deduce this last rumour, further than that Mr. Holbourne seemed out of sorts. But to be suspected of embarrassment is a cruel strain upon any bank. More than one perfectly sound business has collapsed under the upas tree of suspicion. They are not all card houses that go down in a commercial hurricane. Goodly and substantial traders get sometimes engulfed in the storm. The reckless speculators originate the malstrom, but it sucks down a good many whose houses were built upon its banks, though ever so substantially. Holbourne & Co. experience an awkward time of it, due solely, when traced to first causes, to Miss Langworthy's clever impersonation of Ariadne.

Things weigh heavily on Grace at this time. She cannot disguise from herself that her father is worn, worried, and anxious. He is shorter than ever with her, and replies quite snappishly to her inquiries about his health, &c. ; such confidences as he may choose to bestow are reserved for Marion. Grace feels sadly that her cousin has taken her place. She could bear it better did she not so thoroughly comprehend the falsity of Marion's character. Powerless though she is to counteract them, she begins to see through many of Miss Langworthy's designs, though what her object is in thus ostentatiously wearing the willow, still puzzles Grace amazingly. What a mockery it is, no one knows better than Miss Holbourne.

Sadly one afternoon Grace puts on her hat and slips out for a walk. Aldringham society she has rather eschewed of late—the girl is sick at heart of listening to calumnies on her lover, or feeling her ears tingle as she catches some fresh slander about her brother. She makes her way as shortly as possible to the outskirts of the town, and proposes to herself a good stretch in the

country. But ere she clears the houses, Grace becomes conscious that her footsteps are dogged. She has no idea by whom, and does not like to look round; nevertheless, she feels instinctively that a man is following her. She is not alarmed in the least, although she certainly feels some annoyance. It will curtail her walk for one thing, as she has no fancy for going into the country thus attended—more especially as she has not achieved a good look at her follower. Having just cleared the houses, Miss Holbourne turns sharply round, and in ten paces confronts her unlicensed attendant.

A tall, good-looking man she thinks, as she steals a glance at him from beneath her eye-lashes, and essays to pass him. But the gentleman in question deliberately bars her path, and raising his hat, exclaims:

"I must ask pardon, Miss Holbourne, for delaying you, but it is my fate once more to prove your postman. You drove a hard bargain for the last letter I brought you. I have one now for you, postage paid."

Grace lifted her eyes, and at once recognised her tormentor of the fancy fair.

"Mr. Donaldson! I know all about you now, though I didn't then," and Grace frankly extended her hand—"I know you are one of Charlie's dearest friends."

"First let me present my credentials," replied the dramatist, as he handed her a letter; "and then, if you do not mind extending your walk, I have a further message for you."

Grace turned about directly, and the two paced on for a few moments in silence.

"It would make my mission much easier, Miss Holbourne, if you would first read your letter. My only desire—my only errand here is to serve both you and Charlie. You will see what he says—I can tell you afterwards what I am further commissioned to say. Let us stroll quietly on while you master the contents of that epistle. Don't trouble yourself about speaking to me till you feel inclined."

Slowly the pair sauntered on, Grace absorbed in her letter, her companion somewhat amused at the idea of

assisting in a genuine comedy of real life—a subject on which his brains had been so often exercised.

Charlie's letter was honest and straightforward. He somewhat deprecated the step he was urging her to take, but he argued there was no help for it. "As things stand, Gracie, there is no prospect of my ever being welcomed as wooer of yours. Home, I know, must be most distateful to you; you have been ousted from your proper place, and Marion Langworthy has been set over your head. It is impossible to contend with her influence over your father at present. We can but trust to time to open his eyes. Have you courage, dearest—have you confidence enough in me to give yourself to me at once? I can find you a home, if not so luxurious as that which you will discard, at all events a happier one. Were your father untrammelled—were his eyes not blinded—I would wait patiently for better times; but while Miss Langworthy reigns at Aldringham, I see no prospect of a change in our favour. I had scarce ventured to urge you to this step, had it not your brother's approval. He knows all, Gracie, and I have his warrant for saying he will receive and take care of you till our marriage takes place. Think over it well, darling. If you can but make up your mind to it, I am sure it will prove best for both of us. You will shrink, perhaps, at the idea of elopement, but remember your brother will meet you in London, and that our wedding will be sanctioned at all events by him."

There were at least a couple of pages more special pleading, winding up with an intimation that the bearer was fully conversant with the outlines of the case, and that unlimited trust might be reposed in him. Miss Holbourne coloured deeply as, after the perusal of her letter, she turned to her companion, and remarked, with no little asperity,

"I presume this effusion was submitted to your judgment before it was closed?"

"Mine! Excuse me, Miss Holbourne; in the delicate situation in which I stand with respect to you at present I can afford no mistakes. That you are engaged to my most intimate friend against the approval of your father,

I am, of course, aware—also that you are forbidden to receive his letters; I undertook, at his desire, to give you that, and further promised to do your bidding after you had read it."

"Forgive me!" cried Grace; "but I am so bewildered, I scarce know whom to trust, or what to do."

"Don't think me presumptuous or intrusive," returned Donaldson, quietly, "but, Miss Holbourne, I have known Charlie for years, and you may trust him. I have seen him hardly tried, and never knew him fail. What he may have urged you to do, I don't know, though perhaps I may guess. As I have already said, I am only here to do your bidding. I am a stranger to you, but, believe me, you will have no cause to regret such confidence as you may please to bestow upon me."

For a few minutes they walked on in silence. At last Grace said abruptly,

"When do you return to town, Mr. Donaldson?"

"When I have your permission. Unless you conceive my stay can be of benefit to you, I shall leave by the mid-day train to-morrow. But, as I said before, I have come here to be of use to you, if I can."

"Listen!" exclaimed Miss Holbourne, eagerly, "I can give you no answer now. You doubtless form some idea of what it is that Charlie has asked me to do. It is no light step that he calls upon me to take. I must have time to think over it. But I will let you know to-morrow morning. You are staying at 'The George,' I suppose? I dare not send you a note there; but if I pass the door between eleven and twelve, don't leave Aldringham till the six o'clock train. If you don't see me, your mission is ended; if you do, consider that you have charge of me to town. Now please continue your walk a little further. If we were seen together, Aldringham would have a restless night consequent upon the consideration of my case. Good-bye Mr. Donaldson," continued Grace, as she extended her hand. "I thank you for what you have already done, and gratefully acknowledge the kindness which has induced you to devote so much time to my service. Charlie must teach

me how best to repay you." And, with a graceful reverence, Miss Holbourne turned homewards,

The dramatist, having struggled through the dire dinner characteristic of a country inn, betook himself to the study of life in the local billiard-room. As he listened languidly to the vapid chaff and converse of the choice spirits of Aldringham, he recognised woefully that friendship had its duties. Consumed with weariness, while the clock still asserted that it was but half-past ten, he thought ferociously over those malignant irreclaimable liars who had written about taking their ease at an inn.

However, there's a conclusion to all things. Evenings at country inns have an end, and at last Donaldson sought his pillow. At eleven he was lounging on the steps with a cigar between his lips; at about half-past he saw Miss Holbourne approaching. She raised her veil as she drew near, so as to thoroughly expose her face, although she never once glanced at the door of the hotel. She passed rapidly, and although he remained there some time longer he saw her no more. Still his instructions were now clear, and after passing what seemed a nearly interminable day, Donaldson, at a quarter to six, betook himself to the station. He had not to wait long before he espied Miss Holbourne walking on to the platform, with a small travelling bag in her hand. She passed him close, favoured him with a significant glance, deposited her bag upon one of the seats, and then betook herself to the bookstall, where she commenced turning over the periodicals. There Donaldson at once joined her. A slip of paper fluttered from her fingers in front of him.

"Do what I ask you," she whispered, nervously; and, dropping her veil, she disappeared quickly into the ladies' waiting-room.

Donaldson glanced over the slip of paper. The instructions were clear and brief:

"Take me a ticket for town—put my bag into a carriage, and reserve a seat for me. Stand outside the door so that I may know into which carriage to get. I shall join you at the last moment. I am afraid of seeing somebody I know. Telegraph to my brother to meet me."

As for the telegraphing, that had been done hours ago, Shortly after Miss Holbourne had passed the steps of the "George," Donaldson had sent off a message to Charlie. to meet the nine train at King's Cross, and bring Reginald Holbourne with him. He pounced at once upon the bag, procured a couple of tickets, and on the arrival of the train, lounged carelessly in front of the carriage he had selected. As the bell rang, Grace, closely veiled, emerged from the waiting room, passed quickly across the platform, and jumped in without speaking.

A shrill whistle, and the train glided from the station. Miss Holbourne's elopement was a thing accomplished.

"A new experience this altogether," mused the dramatist, "running away with a young lady to oblige a friend. Levanting with another man's *fiancée* in consonance with his own instructions. I trust Charlie and Holbourne will be there to meet us, or the situation will become farcical as far as I am concerned, although, poor girl, she would scarcely appreciate the absurdity of her position."

With the exception of a sleepy old gentleman, they had the carriage to themselves, but Grace was evidently too much agitated for conversation.

"You are very kind, Mr. Donaldson," she replied, in answer to some commonplace remark that he had made, "but I am too nervous to talk. Pray excuse me."

And so they travelled on in silence towards London.

As they neared their destination, Grace became more and more troubled in her mind. She knew well how so bold a step as she had taken would be commented on when it became known to Aldringham. She almost dreaded to meet her lover for fear he should hold her in less esteem for yielding to his urgent entreaties. She shrank back back in her place as the train swept into the terminus, and seemed to derive but little consolation when her escort informed her that he saw both Collingham and her brother awaiting them on the platform. It was with jealous eyes she scanned Charlie as he advanced to greet her, to gather, if she could, whether he regarded her more lightly for her rashness. But his manner did much to re-assure her.

"I can never thank you sufficiently, Grace," he whis-

pered, gravely, "for this great proof of your trust in me. I will say no more now, for you are doubtless worried and tired with all the anxiety this step has cost you. The sooner Reginald can get you home the better." And beyond a warm pressure of the hand as she drove off with her brother, Charlie's welcome was made.

It may sound slight greeting to a girl whom he had induced to leave her home for his sake, but in her present mood Grace appreciated it far more highly than had it been warmer. It showed she had not lost her place in his esteem, and she was far more anxious about that just now than about what hold she might have of his heart. She felt secure of the latter, but concerning the former she had been distracted with nervous misgivings—uncalled for though they might be.





CHAPTER XXXVII.

MR. LIGHTFOOT BECOMES EXACTING.

IT is open to question whether Aldringham had ever tasted the full flavour of scandal until the day that succeeded Miss Holbourne's elopement. High flavoured gossip they were accustomed to—sad stories had gone around about many of their citizens, and Aldringham, with untiring tongue and bated breath, had uttered never-ending commentaries on these miserable back-sliders. But here was a young lady, whose personal attractions and winning manners had naturally made as many foes as friends, who had taken the desperate step of leaving her father's roof without his knowledge or sanction. Aldringham wept over her, but declared itself not astonished.

I have always held that most of our nursery ballads are allegorical. That famous one commencing "Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye," is undoubtedly so—rye, by the way, an evidently mistaken spelling of wry. It, of course, refers to a suspected scandalous story, of which the thin crust of propriety has not as yet been shivered—"And when the pie was open the birds began to sing," the veil is rent, and the tongues of the public are at length loosened—"And was not that a pretty dish to set before the king?" that is to say, was not this a pretty case to bring to the notice of the constituted authorities.

Well, the pie was open, and the birds were singing in Aldringham at a great rate, albeit somewhat in the dark as to how Miss Holbourne had fled. Thanks to the precautions she had taken at the station, no one had seen or guessed her departure thence. The booking clerk was quite positive he had issued no ticket to Miss Holbourne; a porter had been found who certainly did recollect seeing her at the station that evening, but no one was found to testify to her departure by the train. These enquiries were instituted by Aldringham generally, with a view to assuaging its curiosity on the subject.

As for the banker he knew all there was to tell that very evening. Grace had left a note behind her imploring her father's forgiveness, declaring that it was beyond her strength to break her troth and give up Charlie Collingham; yet still vehemently asserting that nothing should have induced her to take so extreme a step, had not Marion stepped between her and himself.

"She stands, father, between you and your children. Reginald and I both feel we are powerless to contend against her malignant influence. How persistently she has made home miserable to me, I cannot describe. It is not easy to do so. I can allege nothing against her; and yet I know that my lightest word was watched, weighed, and, in many cases, twisted ingeniously to my disadvantage. She has your ear, father, which your children have lost. When her tongue sings our praises distrust her most, for, be assured, you will think worse of us afterwards than you do now. At present she triumphs, but I trust the time may come when you will acknowledge that my conduct was not without excuse. Your ever loving daughter,
"GRACIE."

Miss Holbourne's absence had first become apparent at dinner-time, some two hours after she had left the house. The note reached her father's hands within twenty minutes of the discovery. Though she did not exactly say that she was going to her brother's, she explained that she should be at all events under his protection, so that Mr. Holbourne was absolved from any great anxiety on her account. To say that he was not grievously perturbed at the flight of his daughter would be to wrong

him much. He was wondrous silent at dinner. He informed Marion curtly that her cousin had gone suddenly to town without asking his sanction, and that Reginald was to take care of her. Miss Langworthy angled throughout the meal, with most praiseworthy perseverance, for a sight of Grace's note; but her uncle failed to take the hint, and retired abruptly to his study when dinner was concluded.

Marion, meanwhile, mused considerably over this new phase of affairs. She was not altogether unprepared for it—indeed had exerted herself not a little to bring it about; but Grace's flight had rather taken her by surprise. It was exactly what she had hoped to compass, but she had intended to be a good deal more behind the scenes regarding that elopement when it should occur than she was at present. Had she as yet anticipated such a move on her cousin's part, she would have exercised more vigilance concerning her. She would not have lifted a finger to prevent it, but she would have been at some pains to obtain sight of such missive as Grace might leave behind her, in explanation of the step she had taken. Had that letter reached Marion's fingers, it had never gained Mr. Holbourne's. Miss Langworthy is not a little discomposed that she so far failed to get a sight of that epistle. True, she is left entire mistress of her uncle's house—the position she was aiming at—but those last words of her cousin's might contain facts that needed prompt refutation. She must see that letter, if possible; she felt that she had to confront an unknown danger till she was aware of its contents. The banker was evidently strongly moved by the whole business, and Miss Langworthy deemed that she might encounter stormy weather before long in the prosecution of her nefarious designs.

Marion was not a whit dismayed by the idea. Intrigue was to her as the air she breathed; she rose in spirit to the difficulties of the moment; the more imminent the dissolution of her fine-spun diplomacy, the more industrious was she in repairing the rents thereof—the quicker in improvising fresh schemes in support of it—the more daring in her manœuvres to baffle such attacks. But a

Nemesis she wots not of as yet is already threatening her—a ravening spirit that she has herself evoked—a horse-leech to which she voluntarily stretched forth her hand—a slave with a thirst for gold insatiable, and a most accurate estimate of how much she is within his power—a spirit she has been bold enough to raise, but will find somewhat difficult to lay. When Miss Langworthy was rash enough to sign that bill which Mr. Lightfoot had the audacity to send her, she delivered herself utterly into his hands.

Mr. Holbourne, in his study, sits moody and dejected, his daughter's letter still clasped between his fingers. He was out of spirits before. The run on the bank consequent on Aldringham gossip had irritated him. Though nothing more than the firm could easily meet, it had chafed him to be even suspected of insolvency. His quarrel with his son had rankled far more in his mind than he cared to admit. Now came the flight of his daughter, and the banker knew well that would be the talk of the town next day. He thought a good deal over Grace's letter. He loved his children dearly. Was her accusation true, that he had allowed his niece to come between him and them? He turned this over and over again in his mind, and still he could arrive at no conclusion. Still there was the hard fact that at this moment he stood divided from them. In what manner had he forfeited his claim to their obedience? On this count Mr. Holbourne most thoroughly absolved himself. If a father had not the right to step between his child and an imprudent marriage, what right of interference with his children did he possess? And yet Mr. Holbourne argued that was the sole tyranny that either his son or daughter could lay to his charge. And who, in a worldly point of view, could say that he was not justified in interposing in both cases?

Still, as the banker reflected how entirely he had yielded the management of his household to Miss Langworthy, he could but acknowledge, with a slight tinge of reproach, that he had given his daughter some cause for feminine jealousy. The guidance of his establishment was hers by right; but surely that was not

sufficient cause to justify a daughter in withdrawing herself from her father's protection. He utterly failed to comprehend Grace's letter. He did not understand her passionate denunciation of her cousin. He deemed her hurt because the keys were not in her keeping. He never thought her heart might be sore at seeing Marion preferred to a confidence from which she was excluded. Finally, Mr. Holbourne rose, and wended his way to his chamber, sad, but self-acquitted. Like Lear, he suffered from the misconduct of his unduteous progeny.

The next morning's post brought a slight shiver to Marion, as she recognized the well-known handwriting of that secret agent of hers, Mr. Lightfoot. Business, he said, had brought him unexpectedly to Aldringham. It was necessary that he should see Miss Langworthy on the subject of that bill she had given him a short time back, as it was just due. He had also important information to communicate concerning Lettice Cheslett. Would Miss Langworthy grant him an interview? He would be at the first milestone on the Thrapstone road at four that afternoon, in hope that Miss Langworthy might condescend to be there also.

He was her Old Man of the Sea. Marion's heart turned sick as she felt intuitively that she should never succeed in shaking him off. Fifty pounds was the amount of that liability, and Miss Langworthy reflected with a sigh that she was no more the possessor of that sum than when she signed that evil bit of paper two months ago. What would happen if she didn't pay, Marion had no idea. She had, however, a hazy idea that there would be an *exposé* of some sort, and that consequently it was a thing which it behoved her to arrange somehow. So, a little before four, Miss Langworthy took her hat and walked out upon the Thrapstone road. As she neared her tryst, Mr. Lightfoot rose from the milestone on which he was seated, and with prompt alacrity advanced to meet her.

"Well, sir," exclaimed Marion haughtily, as he raised his hat, "I have attended at your bidding. I presume money is your object. You may as well know at once that I have none."

"So commonplace an occurrence, as far as regards my experience of humanity, Miss Langworthy, that you can scarcely expect me to affect surprise at your announcement. But you have hit the truth, with your accustomed perspicuity. Money is my object,—money I must have."

"But I tell you I have none!"

"Exactly. When we have no money, the next thing to consider is what we have that represents money," replied the unabashed Lightfoot.

"You mean, have I jewels, or anything of that description! Whether I have or not, I have no intention of parting with them," said Marion curtly.

"She has jewelry," thought the adventurer. "You are quick of understanding, Miss Langworthy," he continued deferently. "Will you allow me to observe that an accepted bill of yours is just due, and requires taking up."

"How if I fail, sir?"

"I should be afraid there would be unpleasantness. My friend, Mr. Hartz, who negotiated it, is an inestimable man, but somewhat rigorous about business matters. In short, Miss Langworthy, he'd sell up his first-born if he omitted to meet his bill when due."

"And supposing I let things take their course?" inquired Marion.

"I should be afraid your arrest for debt would be the speedy consequence. But if you don't like to part with your jewels, you have still your name, which represents money."

"I don't understand you."

"If Miss Langworthy will attach her name to this," replied Lightfoot, producing an oblong strip of paper, "it will enable me to quash the bill now falling due, and also to discharge her debt to me regarding expenses incurred in tracing Lettice Cheslett."

"You have found her, then! Where is she?" cried Marion eagerly.

"Sign, and you shall know," retorted the tempter, as he produced pen and ink from his pocket.

Miss Langworthy took the slip of paper and gazed at it for a moment.

"Why, this is for one hundred!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; interest and expenses of renewal; recompense to self *in re* matter of Lettice Cheslett; it couldn't be well less."

"I'll never sign it!" cried Marion indignantly.

"It must be as you like, but as sure as you stand there, old Hartz will cause your arrest the first time your foot crosses the threshold after Sunday next."

Miss Langworthy paused. She felt she was in the toils. She was powerless to resist the merciless pressure put upon her. To be arrested for debt in Aldringham! it was not to be thought of. Three months more and her ascendancy over her uncle might be so complete that she could compass this sum upon some pretext—ay, even if she admitted culpable extravagance. Besides, it was necessary that she should know what had become of that Cheslett girl.

Her mind was made up.

"Give it me," she said, "I will sign;" and in another second Marion's autograph figured at the foot of that ominous piece of paper. "Now what of Lettice Cheslett?" she ejaculated fiercely, as she handed back the bill to her companion.

"She is living at Sir John Collingham's, Churton Park," replied Lightfoot deliberately, "and has been there nearly a month."

"At Churton!" gasped Miss Langworthy. "You are sure?"

"Perfectly so," he replied, as he eyed her narrowly. "Have you any further commands for me?"

"No," said Marion in a low voice, as she turned abruptly on her heel and walked rapidly back to the town.

"Not a woman of business," muttered Mr. Lightfoot, "or she would have insisted on having the first bill back. As it is, I shall renew that, if possible, and negotiate this. If it comes to the worst, and she has no jewels to speak of to meet 'em with, her uncle's safe to settle it sooner than have a blow up in the papers. If old Hartz isn't too hungry for his money, she ought to be worth about as much more. Anyway I can't be touched, and we

must take such windfalls as come in our way. It strikes me she had fair information for her money to-day, judging from the way she took it."

"Lettice Cheslett at Churton!" muttered Marion, as, wrapping her shawl close about her, she walked swiftly homeward. "I had a presentiment, when I saw that girl in Baker Street, she was my evil destiny. I deemed I crushed her beneath my feet, that I swept her from my path that afternoon. Now she confronts me again. It is odd I have not heard of her sooner, if she is established in Churton! Stay, now I think of it, Grace did say something, a week or two back, of some girl that had come down as a companion to Sylla Collingham, but who was immediately struck down with fever, and seemed as if she would hardly get through it. Can that be Lettice? It must be. I don't think she can work me much harm. Yet Reginald is sure to hear of her being at Churton from his sister. Still as long as she does not identify me with her visitor in Baker Street, no harm can come of it. Fortunately I seldom trouble Churton, so that my eschewing it for the next couple of months, will not give occasion for remark. I can't see that she can work me woe in any shape, still I do wish she was a hundred miles away!" With which last reflection, Marion rang at her uncle's house.

That Miss Cheslett was going under another name in Sir John's family, Miss Langworthy was of course as yet unaware.





CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AN IRREGULAR WEDDING.

“**W**HO is this, Reginald?” inquired Grace, as she gazed inquisitively at a photograph that, mounted in a stand, held a conspicuous place on her brother’s writing-table. It was the morning after her flight, and the girl was fluttering nervously about the sitting-room, too ill at ease at present to rest quiet. For though Miss Holbourne had hardened her heart to the extent of running away to get married, she suffered sore twinges of apprehension that she had behaved very badly to her father, and that her character was likely to be hardly dealt with by the gossiping tongues she had left behind her.

“That?” rejoined her brother, somewhat moodily—“nobody you ever saw; but she will be your sister, Grace, I hope, some day.”

“I don’t know—I can’t help thinking I have seen her,” rejoined Miss Holbourne, musingly, although I can’t say where. Tell me her name, Regi.”

“Lettice Cheslett. Now are you satisfied? Did you ever hear of her?”

“No, I never heard that name before; and yet I fancy I have seen this face. Ah! I recollect now who it is that this photograph reminds me of—it’s very like that girl who has come down as companion to Sylla Collingham; but then, poor thing, as I only saw her in bed with her hair all cut off, and delirious——”

Suddenly Grace stopped aghast. She recollected now what that sick girl had uttered in her wandering talk, and knew that it was her likeness she now looked upon. She bent over the picture for a few seconds, then turned to steal a look at her brother. He was at her side.

"What is all this?" he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Is Lettice at Churton, and dangerously ill? Speak quick! Tell me what you know."

"I will," faltered Grace. "A Miss Melton, who came as companion to Sylla, was seized with fever the day after her arrival. She lies dangerously ill there now. But, Reginald, I won't deceive you—I am telling you the exact truth—the doctor pronounced the crisis past before I left Aldringham. She is still not out of danger, but has got safely through the worst."

"Do they take care of her? Are they kind to her?" he asked, almost roughly.

"Be easy on that point. Sylla herself tends her as if she were a sister. All that care and nursing can do for her, she has. Reginald," continued Grace in a low voice, "I watched by her bedside one afternoon with Sylla. She wandered much, poor thing, in her talk. Suddenly she mentioned your name, and called upon you to stand between her and some other woman."

Reginald's face grew dark.

"I begin to understand," he said. "What more did she say?"

"Nothing," replied Grace. "Do you love her very much?" she whispered timidly.

"So much," he answered sternly, "that if I lose her, I have lost everything. Will she live?"

"Reginald! Reginald!" cried his sister, as she threw her arms about him, "don't ask such questions! Her life trembled in the balance at one time—it may be, does still; but the doctor has great hope."

"Sit down, Gracie," he said, releasing himself gently from her embrace—"I must have news—constant news, mind, of how Lettice goes on. How am I to obtain it? Think. Whom can you or I trust to for daily intelligence?"

"I might write to Sylla; but then poor Sylla must

trust to other eyes for the rendering of my note. Besides, Reginald, my own whereabouts is awkward to call attention to. You forget how I am situated at present." And Miss Holbourne dropped her head upon her hand somewhat moodily.

"True. Forgive me, Gracie, I forgot your troubles in thinking of my own. But we mean to put a speedy end to yours, my sister."

Gracie raised her head with a bright blush. Her lover was to take her to himself next day, and the girl grew rosy-red at the thought of her runaway marriage.

"Stay," she said, "you might write to Sylla yourself. Tell her as much or as little as you may deem necessary about your relations with Miss Melton—the less the better, I would say, remembering that it will be for other eyes to translate to her. Could she read it herself, I would say tell her all."

"Yes, I think that will do. Sylla and I have ever been great friends, and as you say Lettice in her light-headedness mentioned my name, she will easily guess that I have deep interest in her patient's well-doing. I will write at once, but I can't afford to be very communicative under the circumstances."

For a few minutes there was silence between them, broken only by the slight scratching of Holbourne's pen. Suddenly Grace exclaimed—

"Regi, who was the woman that Miss Melton seemed so afraid of?"

"Never mind—I don't know—that is, it is but conjecture on my part. You will comprehend it all, if my guess is right, before long. Don't bother now, there's a good girl," and once more his pen travelled rapidly.

Grace meditated for some time on this mysterious woman, from whom Lettice, in her delirium, had so shrunk; but that it should be the image of Marion that had so haunted the poor fever-stricken girl's pillow, never for one instant crossed her imagination. Soon Grace's mind wandered off to the thought of the event that was to take place to-morrow. She could but feel pangs of remorse and misgiving concerning this wedding she was about to make, unhallowed by a parent's sanction.

Reverence for age, and respect for their progenitors, are two weaknesses that can scarcely be ascribed to the rising generation ; but Grace Holbourne was not of this kind, and she had honestly shed salt tears before she had left her father's roof to plunge into wedlock that he especially banned. Nothing but the conviction of Marion's undue influence over him—nothing but the apparent hopelessness of inducing the banker even to think of Charlie as a son-in-law—could have made Grace yield to her lover's entreaties. But Miss Langworthy's silvery tongue was hard to bear. Professing utter ignorance of the whole affair, she would indulge in the most scandalous fables of Charlie Collingham's wrong-doings, and make her cousin writhe under the libels she choose to disseminate concerning him, which Grace, with her engagement all unlicensed of the authorities, was compelled to listen to in silence. The silken lash in practised hands stings sharper than the knotted dog-whip. Malicious sympathy is harder to bear even than the rough abuse of those that vilify our actions.

"Gracie," said Reginald Holbourne, as he finished his letter, "I have something to tell you, and though I have full liberty to do so, and it's something you ought to know, I don't mean to go into the story. I'll tell you why at once. You have heard all the rumours about Charlie's being married?—you have had your life teased out of you on that point at Aldringham, I make no doubt. Is it not so?"

"It's been hard to bear that," said Grace, as she crossed the room, and knelt by her brother's side. "What is it?—has he told you the secret of what he calls his Bluebeard chamber? I have always had implicit faith in Charlie, or I could not venture on what I now do."

"Yes, he has," replied her brother, as he stroked her silky tresses. "He has authorized me to tell it you, if I think good. My sister, there is nothing to prevent your marrying him, and I think it best you should hear the story from his own lips. There will be no Bluebeard's chamber between you and him after to-morrow; and, Gracie, though he may not be rich, he *does* love you,

and will take great care of you. Will that do, little woman?"

"Yes," she replied, as the blood mantled in her cheeks. "I think—I know—" And here Grace dropped her head upon her brother's shoulder.

"Think what?" said Reginald, laughing.

"That you speak truth, you tease," replied his sister, as she jumped abruptly to her feet, and avenged herself by a sharp twist of his ear.

"You treacherous viper!" exclaimed her brother. "Thank heaven! to-morrow will see more legitimate bell-ropes at your disposal, and I shall suffer no longer from your infirmities of temper. But, Grace," he continued, as his face fell, "do you think Sylla will send me news daily?"

"Yes," replied his sister, gravely; "but remember, Reginald, the girl is recovering from a terrible illness, and, if the reports are true, as I know they will be, they must be fluctuating. Make up your mind to hear good news one day, bad the next."

"I have served my apprenticeship," replied Holbourne, in a low tone. "I have spent some gloomy evenings here since I lost sight of her; but, hap what may, I must see her again. If die she must, she shall know, at all events, that I never swerved in my allegiance."

"Reginald," said his sister, solemnly, "what made her put herself out of your reach, I don't know; but it was neither want of love for you, nor of trust in you."

* * * * *

Preposterous state of the elements! If ever the heavens were called upon to weep, it was at the contemplation of such an irregular wedding. Yet here was the sun blinking over this runaway November match, as if aiding and abetting the ceremony. Still it was such a marriage as no woman can read of without a shudder. Such a bridal! Ye maidens of England who may dream of elopement, I pray you to reflect. Two cabs!—think of this!—out of which bundled—no words can be prosaic enough in which to describe such indecorous proceedings—from the one Reginald and his sister, from the other Charlie and Jim Donaldson. More earnestness, more

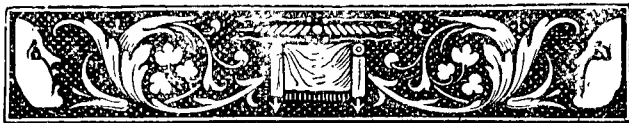
reality over the ceremony, perhaps, than when it is consecrated by a bishop, and four horses are curveting in the bridal chariot. A quarter of an hour at the altar—an embrace from her brother, a warm clasp of the hand from Donaldson, and Grace is borne away by her husband, rich it may be in his love, but—trousseausless!

In the course of that afternoon Grace is taken to a quiet suburban churchyard, and shown a plain marble stone, inscribed as "Sacred to the memory of Lilian, wife of Charles Collingham, Esq., who departed this life in the twentieth year of her age." While she gazes reverently upon it, Charlie tells her the story of his dead love.

"The love of my boyhood, Gracie, lies buried beneath that marble, and very dear to me she was at the time; but the love of my manhood is yours. Strange wedding has been ours! Never did man, perhaps, tell the story of his past life to his bride by the side of his first wife's tomb before. But you understand why I do this, Grace. There must never be secret between us more. I wanted you to understand my whole past at once, so that a cloud concerning it may never cross our future. I look back reverently on the wife of my youth—I look forward to happiness with her who holds the heart of my manhood."

A quiet pressure of Grace's hand was Charlie's sole answer, and, in silence, they left that still resting-place of the departed. The wind sighed a requiem through the gnarled old yews as Collingham turned his back on the grave of her whom he had braved his father's wrath to wed. Fit monody over the wreck of that youthful passion. The wild love of his boyhood lies buried—the strong earnest love of the man fills its place. Gracie has won that honest resolute regard that, if it never burns so fiercely, yet never wanes, but maintains its steady glow, bright as when first kindled, till death stamps out the flame.





CHAPTER XXXIX.

CONVALESCENCE.

IN a sofa, propped up with numerous cushions, in Sylla's own private sanctum, reclines Lettice. The dark hair is just beginning to curl again in short rings about her head, while the big black eyes are positively startling to encounter as they gleam upon you, appearing almost unnatural in size, when contrasted with the shrunk, pallid face they look out from. Sylla hovers about her patient, in supreme delight at having nursed her thus far on the road to convalescence. But Miss Collingham's affliction spares her the discovery of what is becoming a source of grievous disquietude to the doctor, and one or two of the closer attendants on the sick girl. Lettice's nervous system is woefully unhinged. There is a scared, frightened look in her eyes. The appearance of anybody except those she is thoroughly accustomed to see, causes her to tremble from head to foot. There is much difficulty about inducing her to talk. She answers in monosyllables chiefly. Miss Collingham's maid tells the doctor Miss Melton is quite aware that she has been delirious, and at times exhibits a feverish curiosity to know what she might have said when her senses were beyond her control. It is the sole subject upon which she manifests any desire to be enlightened. But that restless, hunted look, so habitual to the dark eyes now, is inexpressibly painful to witness.

It is in vain Sylla prattles cheerfully to the convalescent. Lettice listens with that uneasy expression that now so constantly haunts her face. Very brief are her replies, and made apparently with some effort. She seems to concentrate her mind with difficulty upon what is said to her, and only to comprehend it after severe mental strain.

"This won't do," muttered the doctor to himself, as he left the room, after his customary visit to his patient. "We shall have that girl's mind permanently affected if we are not very careful. It is off its balance still, and if we can't get at what the trouble or fear that so persistently weighs upon her is, and remove her apprehensions forthwith, the finish will be losing the equilibrium altogether. If one knew a little of her past life, one might get at the cause of her anxiety, might combat this nervous dread that so possesses her. She is in evident fear of some person who has wrought her much wrong, or occasioned her much sorrow, once more crossing her path. If she has done evil, poor child, she must have been more sinned against than otherwise."

Impressed with these views, the doctor sought an interview with Sir John, and told him his ideas of Lettice's case. The Baronet had a much deeper vein of tenderness underlying his granite exterior than the world generally gave him credit for, though, like many men of his stamp, he was wonderously afraid of giving vent to such weakness. No uncommon thing, if you study mankind. Men and women are rife enough in this world who studiously conceal the best side of their characters—more especially the former. They are so apt to dread the ridicule that might attach to the discovery of the sentiment that lies beneath the crust of cynicism they affect. In the present age particularly men are very chary of yielding to such temptation, and indulge their feelings in that respect principally by stealth.

Sir John was emphatically a man of action. He listened attentively to what the doctor had to say, then rang the bell at once, and desired that his daughter might be summoned.

"Sylla attended her through most of her ravings,"

he said, "let's hear if she can piece this puzzle together for us."

"What is it, my father?" said Sylla quietly, as she glided into the room attended by Dandy. "You must not keep me long, as I don't like leaving Lettice alone. Ah! you here, doctor!" she exclaimed, as her quick hearing detected the presence of a third person.

There is nothing remarkable about this identification of the worthy medico. The good man employed a country bootmaker, and his boots consequently celebrated his movements in shrill chorus. Sylla's ears of late had grown familiar with their ominous creaking.

Sylla was much distressed when her father told her what Dr. Meddlicott feared, and what it was that they required of her.

"My dear young lady," urged the doctor, "if you cannot give us some clue to what it is that so weighs upon Miss Melton's mind, I don't know how we are to combat her apprehensions. But if something is not done speedily, I augur serious and permanent injury to her understanding. This fever has been the result of some great shock to her feelings. We have arrived at a stage now when it is of the last importance to ascertain what the nature of that shock was. We must find out what it is she evidently dreads. As far as I can judge, she is in terror of meeting some person. Can you help us?"

Then Sylla told them all she knew. How in her delirium Lettice had at times shrunk and cowered as if beneath the lash of some woman's pitiless scorn; and how, finally, she had called upon Reginald Holbourne to shield her—to stand between her and that merciless woman.

The Baronet uttered a slight ejaculation of astonishment as Reginald's name passed his daughter's lips, and when she had finished, said:

"Thanks, Sylla, that will do. You had better leave Dr. Meddlicott and me to talk things over now. You recollect, doctor," he continued, as the door closed behind Miss Collingham, "that there was much gossip about young Holbourne and some lady in London a few months back. It is no irrelevant conclusion to come to now, that your patient was the lady in question."

"Just so, just so," replied the doctor; "but that will help us very little as regards dissipating this fear of some woman unknown which so possesses Miss Melton. Can you divine at all, Sir John, who this woman may be!"

"Not in the least."

For a few minutes the doctor was wrapped in thought. At last, raising his head, he observed:

"We can wait a little longer if you like, but I don't think it will make any difference. If that girl's to become herself again, we must send for Reginald Holbourne."

"I don't like to do that," replied the Baronet. "As, you know, he has quarrelled with his father, I should hardly wish to be looked upon as supporting him in the affair, and that of course it would appear to the neighbourhood."

The doctor was a sturdy, clever man, who paid little reverence to king or kaiser when he deemed the necessities of his art called upon him for plain speaking.

"Sir John," he exclaimed, "this is no time to stickle about proprieties, or what the gossips of Aldringham may say. I tell you, as medical man in charge of the case, unless that girl gets speedy mental relief, her mind will never recover its balance. I have done all that lies in my power. I see but one hope of averting what, mark me, is surely-impending insanity. I can't put it too plain. Of course there may be other springs of the mind we could touch, if we did but know them. We don't. We can but have recourse to the one we do. She must see Reginald Holbourne. What Aldringham may say has never been of much account with you."

"Aldringham!" replied the Baronet, while his lip curled. "No, I don't think, at Churton, we have ever troubled our heads about what Aldringham thought concerning our doings. But Holbourne is an old friend of mine, and I don't like to appear to take his son's part against him."

"And for such a mere punctilio," retorted the doctor, hotly, "you would see that poor girl upstairs permanently bereft of reason."

"I don't say that," interrupted the Baronet, quickly.

"I only say it is awkward, and I wish there were some other way."

"Then if, three days hence, I tell you it is imperative, you will do what I want?"

"Yes, providing no other scheme can be hit upon in the meanwhile."

"Thanks, Sir John, and you may thoroughly depend upon me to suggest one if I can, but at present I see no other alternative. Good morning," and the little doctor creaked out of the room.

The Baronet pondered a good deal during the day over the awkwardness of sending for Reginald Holbourne. He, of all men in the world, should be the last to support a son who opposed his father. He had meted out stern and uncompromising sentence to his own offspring. How was he to side apparently against his old friend under similar circumstances? He recalled, somewhat sadly, how sharply he had rebuffed all those who would have fain said a word in Charlie's behalf; and though he would not acknowledge it to himself, yet at the bottom of his heart lurked a faint suspicion that he would have done better if he had acted with less severity in that business. But Charlie had been dauntless and unyielding as his father in the matter. His blood had been up, and all the old obstinate Collingham temper surged through his veins. He had even, in his wrath, scorned all attempt to right himself in his father's eyes, even when he ascertained the mistake under which Sir John laboured. It must be admitted that he did not think the Baronet would approve of the daughter-in-law he had given him, very much more than if she were the questionable lady Sir John deemed her. But there Charlie was wrong. An imprudent marriage is a very different thing from a tainted one. And had his father known the rights of the story, it is probable that the sun might at last have gone down on his wrath.

Still the Baronet mused over the awkwardness of the situation. What Reginald Holbourne's actual relations might have been with this girl suddenly flashes across him as another delicate point that he would desire to be enlightened upon. But after a few minutes' cogitation

he does Lettice justice. That fair, frank face carries its own justification with it. Whatever her connection may be with Reginald, he feels that it is one that can never call the blush of shame to her cheek.

That evening brings to him the tidings that Grace has fled from her father's roof, and now Sir John feels indeed that interference in the banker's affairs requires more than ever to be approached delicately. He had not been in Aldringham for a couple of days, or he would have known of it forty-eight hours sooner. He is very grieved about this. He is very fond of his god-daughter, in his own way, and is stricken with a terrible fear that she has fled at the bidding of that discarded son of his, whom Sir John firmly believes to be still fettered to a worthless woman. He sighs heavily as he thinks what a harvest of shame and sorrow she is sowing for herself. "Well, he did all he could," he wrote, "and warned her that Charlie was already married, and that if he had dared whisper words of love to her, he was guilty of rank and reckless perjury. But when will girls believe their elders on such points? She knew that he and Charlie had quarrelled. Of course he had small difficulty in persuading her that his father's statements were sheer malice, and utterly untrue. How grieved Sylla would be about it." Then he wondered whether she had any inkling of the elopement? Of her brother's love affair with Grace he of course knew she was cognizant.

When thunder's about, showers are want to be plentiful. When Fortune takes to astonish you for either good or evil, it at times proceeds quickly as a panorama. You progress up or down with a velocity past realizing. Before you have quite awoke to the comfort of clean sheets, you are called upon to appreciate fine linen and delicate viands. On the other hand, before you have quite arrived at an understanding of the scarcity of loose silver, you find yourself ruminating on how much nutriment may be obtained for twopence, and how, by your individual exertions, you are to make twopence more when that is expended. You think I exaggerate. Not at all. But I have seen the man who "has struck ile," and he who has struck the Old Bailey. From the

West-end clubs to the hulks, from "Poverty Flat" to the salons of New York, is but a jump. A few weeks have often produced such results. Fortune is capricious in her runs for either good or evil, and things are going badly with Mr. Holbourne just now.

Sir John has hardly, after a night's rest, made up his mind as to what steps it behoves him to take. He is pledged to the doctor that Reginald Holbourne shall be summoned if there is no amelioration of Lettice's state in three days. But how, is another matter. Shall he ask him openly to Churton, or tell him to come quietly to the Dornton Station, instead of Aldringham, receive him surreptitiously, and keep his visit, if possible, from the banker's ears?

All these reflections are scattered to the wind by the arrival of the post. Amongst his letters, Sir John recognises one in Grace's hand, and that letter causes an entire change of tactics on the Baronet's part. He was not a man of many weaknesses or affections. His son and heir, Robert Collingham, he regarded with polite indifference. They were upon excellent terms, but the Baronet looked upon his son as somewhat of a prig; and might have felt more affection for him had his conduct been less irreproachable. The feeling may be wrong, but it is, nevertheless, generally the case that there is always a sneaking sympathy for the black sheep of this world, provided they are not dyed of too inky a hue. Those parti-coloured stray lambs are always much pitied by friends and relations. Indiscretions of theirs are glossed over that would call down shrieks of reprobation if committed by their more immaculate brethren. We are so glad it is no worse in the one case; so shocked that the ermine should be stained in the other.

Next to his daughter stood Grace in the Baronet's rugged heart, and her letter made the stern old man pace his study with quick, impetuous steps. Once more he reads it attentively over.

"My dear godfather," it ran, "I have thrown your counsel to the winds, am Charlie's wife, and now ask you to acknowledge me as a daughter. People deem you hard of heart—they don't know you—I do. Harsh,

perhaps, when you think you have been wronged, but just even to those who have offended you. I don't ask you to forgive Charlie for my sake, but I do ask you to hear his story. Believe me, you don't know the truth of that previous marriage. Has he married to please you this time? Ah! Sir John, who is to make peace for me with my father, if you decline?—and though I have braved his anger, I need his forgiveness sorely. He thinks so much of your opinion. My chief hope of reconciliation with him lies in you. I plead for myself—I plead for my husband. Hear him first, and then let me tell you my story. I had more excuse for leaving my father's house than you dream of; I was hardly tried before I yielded to Charlie's entreaties. My god-father, if you are stern, you are just. Don't condemn us till you have heard us plead our cause. My future happiness rests in great measure in your hands—think well, I ask you on my knees, before you decide that Charlie and I are past forgiveness. If you ever loved your god-daughter, don't abandon her now; if you ever loved your son, let him tell you the story of his life. Believe me—and did you ever know me speak falsely?—if you would but listen to Charlie, you would forgive him; and if you pardon him, I know you will pardon me. Your affectionate god-daughter,

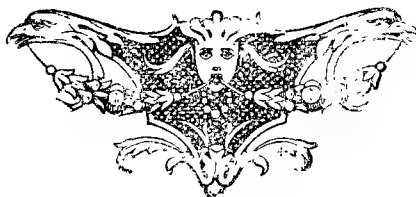
“GRACE COLLINGHAM.

“P.S.—Please—please don't be cruel to me and unjust to Charlie!”

Out of that letter had fluttered an envelope directed, as the Baronet noticed, by his son. It contained two certificates, one of death, the other of marriage—nothing else; but those strips of paper made it manifest to Sir John that Charlie was justified in wooing again.

The Baronet is much troubled in mind as to what he shall do. He cannot bear to think of ignoring Grace's appeal, and yet he can but admit that interference on his part will be in the highest degree inconsistent. He cast off his son for marrying contrary to his wishes! He is asked to pardon him, because this time he has married in direct opposition to the wishes of the bride's father. And yet it seems to Sir John that reconciliation

Charlie is easier now than he ever imagined it could be. That first marriage is an affair of the past, while his present choice meets with the Baronet's warm approval. Still Mr. Holbourne can be hardly expected to be otherwise than wrathful at his daughter's contumacious behaviour, and Sir John feels that there will be a touch of absurdity in his becoming the advocate of a young lady who has shown such wilful disregard of the fifth commandment. But, despite all that, he finally makes up his mind to see the banker forthwith, and to plead Gracie's cause, if possible.





CHAPTER XL.

A NEW PRESCRIPTION.

NO improvement takes place in Lettice ; she fails to gather strength, but lies dreamily on the couch in Sylla's boudoir, and pays but little apparent attention to what goes on around her. Ever and anon that scared, hunted look is visible in the dark eyes, and she trembles like an aspen at any unwonted noise. In vain Sylla tries to rouse her ; the girl answers in monosyllables or with a faint smile to all her blind nurse's untiring efforts to interest her. It seems as if the main-spring of her life had snapped. She lies there white as the snowy wrapper in which she is enveloped, and so still that, but for the somewhat restless eyes, she might have been deemed already numbered with the dead.

Sylla has received Reginald's anxious note, and taken it to her father to read. It shows the Baronet he has made no mistake in his surmise ; and Sylla scribbles off what comfort she may to the writer in reply. But the third day has arrived, and Doctor Meddlcott emphatically reminds Sir John of his promise.

"I can see no other course," said the doctor ; "but I think we may defer sending for Mr. Holbourne for a day or so, though we shall have to summon him in the end. I want Miss Sylla first to let Miss Melton know that he has written to inquire how she is."

Acting under these directions, Miss Collingham, in the course of her conversation, observes,

"I have had a letter full of anxious inquiries about you this morning, Lettice. I have answered it to the best of my ability, and said you are getting better. You are, dear, you know, although slowly."

The remark hardly attracts the sick girl's attention, and Sylla pauses in vain for a reply.

"I thought," she continued, "you might like to send a message to one who, from the way he writes, should be very dear to you. Have you nothing to say to Reginald Holbourne?"

There is no want of interest in the hitherto listless face now. The pale cheeks are dyed crimson at the bare mention of his name.

"Did he write about me?" she gasped. "How did he know I was here? I have tried—oh! so hard—to forget him as I promised, but I can't. No, I only promised not to see him again."

"He writes in sore distress about you, Lettice and begs me to let him know daily how you go on."

"Might I see the letter?" asked the girl, shyly.

"Of course you may; here it is. In future, you sly little thing, I intend you not only to be eyes for me as regards his notes, but pen also, the moment you are strong enough. You must write and tell him how you are. He would rather have a staggy line or two from you than sheets from me. There," she continued, as she put Reginald's note into her patient's hands. "Are you glad to get it?"

Lettice said not a word, but her wan fingers twined round Sylla's in a manner quite conclusive on that point.

"Hah! hah! sir," cried the doctor, in great excitement, when he heard the result of his experiment, "I knew it! They are all alike; that girl will come back from the jaws of the grave now her lover beckons her. If we had not hit off that spring to the mind, we should have had her either in a cemetery or an asylum before the month was over. Now, Sir John, I'm not going to press Reginald's presence on you for a little, though I think it may still be necessary, but we can 'bide a wee,'

as the Scotch say. Tonics be hanged!—there's nothing in the pharmacopœia to compare with love's elixir, when the patient is under twenty."

Left to herself, Lettice read Reginald's hasty scrawl over and over again. Although he had written, in consequence of Sylla's infirmity, more guardedly than he otherwise would have done, still the dullest reader could not be blind to the passionate anxiety betrayed by the writer. A smile played over the girl's face as she thrust the billet in her dress, and abandoned herself once more to reverie. "He does love me still," she murmured—"I knew he did! It has seemed so hard never to hear of him! Did that cruel woman speak truth? It all seems like a frightful dream!"

But when the brain has been overtaxed, as in Lettice's case, it does not recover itself quite so quickly. For a few days Reginald's daily notes proved a veritable tonic—the patient gained ground rapidly, and Doctor Meddlicott, rubbing his hands, told the Baronet that he believed they should manage without young Holbourne after all.

Coming gaily into Lettice's room one morning; Sylla threw a note from Reginald into her lap, and exclaimed, laughing.

"There, it's directed to you, is it not? I wash my hands of your correspondence, *petite* from this moment—you must write your own love-letters in future. I'm sure you are strong enough now, and, if it is any consolation to you, I don't suppose, in your most robust days, they were ever considered *quite* so long as they should be."

A troubled expression came into Lettice's face as she took the note, and the old scared look was once more visible in her eyes.

"Don't say that, please," she said, hurriedly. "You must write—you will, won't you? Reginald will be so grieved not to hear."

Sylla was somewhat startled by the tone, but, of course, the troubled face was lost to her.

"And if he is," she replied, laughing, "whose fault will it be, I should like to know? He has applied to you, not me, this time, to tell him how you are. If he is

grieved, my dear, it will be due to your own sweet indolence, and nothing else."

"Hush! Stop, Sylla, listen to me. I have promised never to write to him—never to see him, if I can avoid it!"

"What!" exclaimed Miss Collingham, as she became keenly alive to the increasing agitation of her companion's voice. "Promised never to see nor write to your lover! What do you mean?"

"What I have said," replied Lettice. "I have promised, and I will keep my word. It might work him harm," she continued, growing more and more hysterical—"that woman said it would. I would not—I—that is—" And here Lettice burst into tears, and Miss Collingham, jumping quickly to the bell, rang for further assistance.

Of course the girl was soon soothed, and Sylla, thinking it no more than a morbid fancy, the result of her severe illness, carefully abstained from alluding again to the subject. Still one thing did strike her as curious, and that was, that Lettice had no letter for the post. She would have been still more perplexed could she have seen how the girl's eyes watched all her movements throughout the day, and the weary, disappointed look that gathered in them when Lettice ascertained that no letter had been despatched to Reginald.

Absurd you may think that this girl should adhere in such scrupulous fashion to a promise extorted under somewhat questionable circumstances. But bear in mind that Lettice has been truthfully, though queerly, brought up; that in her very limited number of acquaintances she has been accustomed to see people mean what they say; that she looks upon her word once passed as by no means to be either violated or evaded; that she is recovering from a severe illness, in which her brain has been seriously affected; that her mind as yet still grasps ideas but feebly, and is utterly incapable of reasoning on any complicated point; and finally, that since the fever, she is possessed of a lurking dread of Marion's power, and firmly believes that any infraction of her promise will recoil upon her lover's head.

In the first thrill of delight at again hearing of him, she had temporarily forgotten all this. In fact, so far, there was no breach of her plighted word. But no sooner did Reginald, in accordance with Sylla's instructions, write direct to Lettice herself, and plead for a bulletin from her own hand, than all the old terrors of her delirium were revived.

It would hurt him dreadfully, she thought, not to answer his letter, but she could not help that. Better his feelings should be wounded than that more serious harm should be wrought him through her not keeping her promise. Lettice, in her diseased imagination, has invested Marion (unknown to her by name, be it remembered) with extraordinary powers. The knowledge she displayed at their one interview concerning herself, filled poor Lettice's mind with awe, while the merciless use she made of that knowledge filled it at the same time with dread. She deemed that Marion's information was boundless, and that any infraction of their contract on her part would be speedily conveyed to Miss Langworthy's ears.

Doctor Meddlcott is not slow to recognise the change for the worse in his patient. There is a return of the old feverish symptoms next day, and it is manifest to his practised eyes that the nervous system is considerably unhinged again. A conversation with Sylla gives the doctor his clue, and he quickly seeks an interview with the Baronet.

"Well, Sir John," he cried abruptly, "we must send for young Holbourne, after all. He was an effective tonic dealt out in homœopathic doses to start with, but he is acting as an irritant now, which is the last thing to meet the case. We must exhibit him as a whole, and see how he agrees with her in that shape. Joking apart, that girl has drifted all to leeward the last twenty-four hours, and her state is still too precarious not to make that a subject of anxiety, at all events, to her doctor."

Sir John has put off making his call upon the banker, not in the least from that besetting weakness which attaches to so many of us, to wit, the postponing anything unpleasant as long as possible, but simply that he judged

it best in Grace's interests to let her father's first indignation burn itself out. "Let not the sun go down upon thy wrath," is a maxim, I fear, but slenderly attended to even by the best of us. Do you remember Frederick the Great's grim jest on these words? His army escaped annihilation at Prague, owing to the inertness of the Austrian generals, and he attributed his salvation entirely to their recognition of the divine precept. They ceased to press their advantage after sunset, and thus enabled him to extricate himself from the toils. But I fear we are more wont to cherish our anger than our good intentions, and a man is apt to be more energetic in his wrath than in his benevolence.

Sir John had written very kindly to Gracie—had, moreover, even sent a message to his son, that held forth fair promise of forgiveness at no very distant period, and promised his god-daughter to intercede in her behalf with her father shortly. He now wished he had done so at once. As he had already said, he did not like welcoming his old friend's son, while he was not on terms with his father. If he had had that interview with Mr. Holbourne he could have at all events explained under what peculiar circumstances he had been induced to have it. But there was no time for that now.

"It shall be as you wish, doctor," he replied at length, "but I think his visit had better be kept as quiet as possible. I will tell Sylla to write to him by to-day's post."

"All right, Sir John. There's no necessity to advertise it in Aldringham. I understand your motives thoroughly and respect them, but I deem his presence here, for a day or so, a necessity, to disabuse my patient's mind on some point which he apparently alone can clear up. You may rely upon my discretion, of course. A doctor is always the confidant of his district—those who don't confide in him die."

"And those who do also at times," retorted the Baronet, laughing.

"True," replied the doctor with a twinkle of his eye, "but in orthodox fashion. It's most irregular leaving this world without medical advice."

Two days more, and the doctor has good grounds for feeling uneasy at Lettice's state. She has past a fevered night, and it is obvious that her mind is again filled with that undefined terror that before possessed her. The note that Sylla puts into her hands this morning does little to tranquilize her. It is directed to Miss Collingham, and full of dire forebodings at not having received a line from Lettice. Sylla, unluckily has given the girl this note without submitting it to anyone's perusal. When she enters the room and glides to the couch some half-hour afterwards, she is astonished to feel her wrist clutched fiercely.

"You must write, write at once!" is hissed into her ear. "Tell him I am better—almost well! How could you be so cruel as not to write yesterday, or the day before? You know I can't. You know what it might cost him if I did. Hear what he says!—how dare you torture him thus! How am I to get well if you treat him so? When he suffers I suffer. I must get well, because he would grieve so if I did not. I can never see him more, but he wills that I should live. It is enough, I shall live for his sake. Write and tell him I am well, and pray for him ever."

Sylla had no need to see the wild, fever-lit eye to know that delirium had once more seized her patient. She bitterly repented that she had given her that note. Regret, however, was useless; it was done, and there was nothing left now but to make the best of it. She soothed the troubled brain as best she might, sat down and wrote a most mendacious account of the girl's health which she submitted to Lettice's perusal; and, finally directing it to Reginald Holbourne, promised it should go by that night's post. She also penned a billet to Dr. Meddlcott, acquainting him with the unfavourable change in Miss Melton, and requesting him to come to dinner. For Reginald Holbourne would be at Churton by that time, and whether he should be allowed to see Lettice or not was a point that Sylla felt only the doctor could determine.

Reginald arrived in due course, and both Sir John and the doctor were struck by the change in him. It was not that he looked ill—a little worn, perhaps, nothing

more; but the light-hearted boy they had known a few months back was transformed into an earnest, serious man. He was very quiet, thanked Sir John for his kindness, touched lightly but gracefully on the awkward position it was for the Baronet, as an old friend of his father's to have to receive a son whom that father disavowed. But, he continued, circumstances at times absolved etiquette, and this to him was a genuine matter of life or death.

"I almost tremble, doctor, to ask you for news. You have both known me from boyhood, and I tell you soberly and earnestly my life is bound up in that flickering life you have struggled so hard to preserve. I mean no nonsense, of course—simply if I lose Lettice I lose all. Men get over such blows, I know. I may, like others, in time; but it will be many years before I have heart to work for more than mere bread and cheese if she is taken from me. May I see her?"

"My dear Reginald," replied the doctor, into whose eyes the young man's earnest speech had introduced a most unprofessional moisture, "I think not just yet. I want you to see her, and still I am afraid of the result. You see, she has manifestly gone wrong for the last two or three days. Now, speaking practically, you are my trump card, and I am loth to use you except to the greatest advantage. If you don't succeed in combating an idea that haunts the poor child's brain, I own I shall be terribly disappointed."

"I understand," replied Reginald, with a weary smile. "I fancy I know, from Grace, and all I have heard of her illness besides, the whole story. Still it is better you should tell me your impressions."

The doctor then entered into the whole history of Lettice's sick bed, dwelling upon the predominant points of her delirium, &c.

"I presume," he observed in conclusion, "that I can depend upon you to keep calm when you see her. Mind, coolness on your part is essential."

"Never fear, doctor; if I'm under the knife I'll not wince. This story is all plain enough to me. That unknown woman is not in the least anonymous, as far as

I am concerned. If you can only bring Lettice round far enough to listen to an explanation, I will guarantee that explanation shall do her more good than all your medicines."

"My medicines!" exclaimed the doctor. "By Jingo! it had need. It's mighty little I can do for her, poor girl, after I have administered *you*. Now off to bed with you! I mean to stay here to-night, but don't intend to try *you* till to-morrow, at all events."

"Thanks ten thousand for all you have done!" And with a warm shake of the hand the pair separated.

I don't think there was much sleep accomplished by either of them. Reginald Holbourne, it may be easily supposed, was little likely to pass a tranquil night under the circumstances. Dr. Meddlcott also felt so much interest and anxiety about the result of the meeting of the lovers that he, too, failed to consummate the sleep of the just.

The doctor was painfully aware that Lettice's mind was in a most critical state. He spoke in all seriousness when he designated Reginald his trump card. He was very sanguine that Holbourne would be able to dissipate that terror the removal of which so completely baffled his science. But the doctor was equally aware that the girl had some monomaniacal idea that her writing to or seeing Reginald would act to his prejudice. It was difficult to foresee how an interview would influence her mind. "If," argued the doctor, "we can get her through the first flurry of that meeting, we shall do; but then, unfortunately, there must be a shock—a thing of all others in her state I should like to avoid. Yet what can we do? It's quite clear, after the failure of our attempt to induce her to answer his letters, that she will strenuously decline to see him, if we break it to her that he is coming. Reginald evidently can solve the whole problem successfully that racks her distraught mind, if we can only persuade her to listen to him for ten minutes; but there is no denying that the sight of him may utterly unhinge her; and if it does—well, it will be a bad business, I fear," mused the doctor. "Still something must be tried; she can't go on in this state. If she is no worse, I'll risk it

to-morrow, in some shape. Pity that note fell into her hands to-day—sad mistake, though Sylla worked hard to retrieve her error. Past twelve—this won't do—an old practitioner worrying his own nerves by thinking about his patients! No, no, I must go to sleep, if only in the interest of other people."

Much puzzled was the doctor next morning how best to play his trump card. Lettice's feverish anxiety was once more painful to witness. The old nervous terror was as apparent as in the very first days of her convalescence. The dark eyes wandered restlessly round the room, and that scared look the doctor had always so much dreaded was as manifest as ever. It was evident that the patient had retrograded—was retrograding fast. He feared the result of introducing Reginald suddenly into her presence.

It was reserved for a woman's quick wit to solve the problem.

"Make Reginald write her a note as if from London, to say that he is coming down to see how she is for himself. Tell him to say that he can show that she has been deceived, imposed upon in every way, and let him speedily follow his letter—that's my advice, doctor," said Sylla Collingham, at the expiration of an earnest conversation with the perturbed medico.

"You are right, Miss Sylla—that's it! I will bring you the note in ten minutes, and the writer had better follow it in about an hour or two."

But the result of that note filled the conspirators with dismay. Lettice got more excited and flighty in her talk after receiving it than ever. She declared she was quite well, and must go away. Reginald little knew what would be the consequences of his rashness—she did, and it was her duty to save him at all hazards. In short, it was found necessary to humour her whim. To soothe her, the carriage was ostentatiously ordered to meet the evening train. Sylla's maid went through considerable demonstration of packing, on Miss Melton's behalf.

Doctor Meddlcott was dreadfully put out at the state of affairs. He told Reginald honestly that he did not

like to undertake the responsibility of introducing him to the sick girl's presence as things stood.

"And yet," he said, "delay seems only to increase the difficulty. A week ago it had been easy. At the same time I am convinced that we shall do no permanent good with her till you have dispelled the hallucination that possesses her."

"Doctor, she is my affianced bride, and therefore I claim some voice in this matter. Let me see her," exclaimed Holbourne, eagerly.

Doctor Meddlicott mused for some moments, and at last said,

"You shall. I'll risk it. Now listen attentively to what I am going to say to you. It is impossible to say how the sight of you may affect her. She may faint, be hysterical, delirious, anything. But whatever it may be, I want her, if possible, to come round again without other aid than yours. You will find all necessary remedies at hand. A touch of the bell, or even a call, will, I need scarcely say, bring me to your assistance; but don't summon me if you can help it. Don't lose your nerve if she swoons. Recollect her physical health is by no means bad, it is her mental state that is so ticklish. Remember, if you can pull through without me I shall deem the victory won, and feel no fears about the future. Now, come."

Reginald's heart beat thick and fast as he followed the doctor upstairs. At the threshold of Lettice's door his conductor paused, and eyed him narrowly.

"No hurry," he said. "She is by herself. Now, if you are ready. Remember, be cool." And with this parting injunction the doctor softly turned the handle of the door, and having admitted his companion, instantly closed it again behind him.

Lettice is lying on a couch near the window, so absorbed in her occupation as to be quite unconscious that she is no longer alone. Most prosaic of occupations is hers. She is studying Bradshaw, and wondering where she should next hide herself. That she must put herself once more out of her lover's reach is a fixed idea in Lettice's mind. Her face is turned from him, and for a

second Reginald pauses doubtfully—in the next his resolution is taken. He crosses swiftly, though quietly, to her side. She turns her head at the sound of his footsteps, but before she can rise his arms have encircled her, and he whispers passionately in her ear,

“At last, my darling, I have found you!”

For a few moments she yields to his embrace, then the dark eyes dilate with terror, and she struggles to extricate herself.

“Go, Reginald, go!” she cries. “What madness brought you here? It is ruin to you to see me again! You know it. She said so. She vowed it should be, and I promised to save you, my own—never to see you more! Quick! away, and she may not discover we have met!”

Her last words rose almost to a shriek, and she fought angrily to free herself from his arms. But Reginald held her close.

“Lettice,” he said, gently, “that woman lied to you. She imposed upon you! She has treated you cruelly! She can do me no harm! She can do you no harm! On the contrary, it is *I* who intend to exact a heavy reckoning from her, for all the pain and anxiety she has cost us both. Be still, child!”

Exhausted by her struggles, Lettice now lies tranquil in her lover’s embrace, her head pillowed on his breast. There is assurance of safety in those strong arms that are wound about her. The quiet, resolute tones soothe her excited nerves. Moreover, that cool threat of vengeance on her dreaded enemy gives a confidence to the terror-stricken girl that is of incalculable value in dissipating her hallucination. Far from fearing that bugbear of her imagination, to Lettice’s surprise, her lover threatens severe reprisals. Still it is not to be supposed that the clouds that hang over her mind can be dispelled all at once. She raises her head timidly.

“Take me away, Regi. Let’s go far away,” she whispers, “where she cannot find us. I thought I could give you up, but I can’t now. Hush!” she said, lifting her hand with a warning gesture—“speak low—she finds out everything. Let’s go away to-night. I know lots of

places. I was going to hide from you, dear ; now we will go together, and hide from her. Come," and but for the strong encircling arms, Lettice would have sprung to her feet.

Holbourne's mouth twitched, and his features worked strangely. Fell was the curse he gulped down concerning Marion Langworthy, and stern was the vow he made at that moment to show her but scant mercy when the tide turned against her, as he felt it assuredly would. But he remembered the doctor's last words, and though he shook from head to foot, it was in tranquil tones that he replied.

"You are not strong enough to travel yet, Lettice—I am going to stay with you here till you are ; and then I shall marry you, and take you away. You must be quick and grow strong, little woman, for you are a very white, woe-begone-looking Lettice just now. There, keep quiet—I have come down expressly to nurse you, and expect you to be very obedient to my directions."

She smiled up at him, the old trusting, loving smile.

"Listen Regi," she said ; "I shall get well if you never leave me ; but that woman will separate us if you do. Promise not to go away from me again. I am so afraid of her. Are you sure she can't hurt you ?"

"Quite ; nor you either, darling," said Holbourne, as he stroked the short, soft rings of hair that now represented Lettice's once luxuriant tresses.

But the door opens, and in bounces Dr. Meddlcott. The doctor's curiosity was no longer to be restrained. Lettice made a faint effort to assume a more decorous position, but her lover held her fast. "Keep still, child," he whispered, "they all know you belong to me."

"I thought I heard you ring," said the doctor, with a twinkle of his eye.

"Thanks, no—I require no assistance."

The doctor looked keenly at his patient for a few seconds—the scrutiny seemed to satisfy him.

"Assistance !" he exclaimed, turning to Reginald—"no, you young jackanapes, I should think not. I think I could have done such nursing single-handed at your age. Even now I shouldn't mind taking a turn at it." And, with a pleasant laugh, the doctor left the lovers once more to themselves.



CHAPTER XLI.

FOR THE DEFENCE.

MR. HOLBOURNE, however he may attempt to disguise matters to the world, feels Grace's elopement deeply. Although he cannot lay blame to himself concerning it, still, he has an uneasy suspicion that he did not see *dessous les cartes*—that there were facts he was blind to connected with it. The banker is a good deal altered by his domestic troubles. It is true he still retains his old pompous manner, but his self-complacency is perceptibly reduced. He flourishes the eye-glass yet, but it is with a mere ghastly shadow of the oracular manner in which he formerly twirled that article.

Miss Langworthy, meanwhile, strives, and with tolerable success, to be all in all to her uncle. She exerts herself in every way. Never was the *ménage* more sharply looked after than it is at the present ; never were the banker's comforts more carefully attended to ; never were his little foibles more humoured and remembered. Those little dinners he so delights in are constantly urged upon him, and, upon those occasions, Marion employs all her energies to make them go off well. Gifted with rare tact and much fascination of manner, it is not much to be wondered at that she succeeds. When she threw her powers into the contrary direction a while back, it may be remembered she proved quite capable of putting these little reunions out of joint.

It is difficult to describe such an incongruous character as Marion's. She has schemed, and is yet scheming, with apparent success, but she is not mercenary in her designs. She troubles her head nothing about how her uncle may intend to dispose of his property. If the banker showed signs of infirmity, she would make no attempt to benefit herself at the expense of her cousins in his will. She would like to feel that she had influence enough over him to ask for a considerable sum of money without giving any explanation as to why she required it, simply because that would enable her to get quit of Lightfoot, the shaking off of whom she made no disguise to herself was liable to be attended with considerable expense.

But her main object was attained. She was absolute mistress of her uncle's house. Now her cousin was married, Miss Langworthy was perfectly willing that she should be reconciled to her father, and had made up her mind to forward such reconciliation if it lay in her power. She had forgiven Grace her involuntary share in Robert Collingham's offence—but with Reginald it was different. She still felt very bitter about his defalcation, and had no intention that the grass should grow over his quarrel with his father if she could help it. It was a very singular feeling on Marion's part. She had placed no kind of value on this love when it was hers—had taken but little pains to keep it—had always contemplated throwing it on one side, as soon as a more eligible *parti* should offer. Yet when she found he had dared to emancipate himself from her thrall, Miss Langworthy felt as vindictively towards him as her disposition was capable of—and its capabilities in that direction were by no means small.

Her wrath, perhaps, on being analysed, might be found to spring principally from two motives—she was very indignant at finding her hold over him so utterly gone. That he had vouchsafed no reply to her letter, but had written straight to his father on receipt of it, had made Marion supremely angry. Then, again, she was bitterly enraged at her rival not being of her own class; for Miss Langworthy held very high and mighty notions as to

what constituted a lady, and, utterly ignoring the fact that her own blood was of very ordinary vintage, looked down disdainfully upon those whose position was somewhat inferior to her own. She hated Lettice, too, from the moment she set eyes on her. The girl's honest, truthful nature was a satire upon her own scheming disposition; she hated her still more because Reginald so loved her; and finally she hated her because she felt that Lettice was likely to bear testimony against her at some future time. The girl could expose a very pretty tissue of false speaking on Miss Langworthy's part, should she ever meet Reginald again face to face. And here she was, according to Lightfoot's information, established at Churton! This, in Marion's eyes, was another urgent reason why Reginald should not come to Aldringham—and though, considering his peculiar relations with herself, it was scarce likely that he would do so at present, there was much safety in that breach between him and his father. That Reginald and Lettice had already met was quite unknown to Miss Langworthy.

The banker is sitting in somewhat melancholy mood in his own peculiar den. True, his niece is unremitting in her attentions, most devoted to the study of his comforts; but a man cannot help feeling estrangement from his own children, when his disposition is cast in so genial a mould as Mr. Holbourne's. His quarrel with each of them, moreover, as he is well aware, is based upon most sandy foundation. He has forbid Reginald to marry a certain young lady. Reginald, on his part, has declared he will; but still he has not as yet done so. As for Grace she has thought fit to run away with the discarded son of his old friend Collingham. It was against his wish. He, in fact, had expressed himself strongly on the point; but still beyond that he was unrecognised by Sir John, Mr. Holbourne had nothing tangible to allege against Charles Collingham.

He is still musing over these things, when a servant announces that the Baronet wishes to see him, and the announcement barely precedes the visitor himself.

"Holbourne," remarked Sir John, their first greetings passed, "I have come down to have a little serious talk

with you about this marriage of our children. What are we to do about it?"

"Do about it!" exclaimed the banker in astonishment. "Why, you have repudiated Charlie for the last five years. You don't consider his carrying off Grace a plea for forgiveness, do you?"

"Yes, I do," retorted Sir John. "It is the most sensible thing he ever did. The man who *could* carry off my god-daughter and *didn't*, would have been such a fool, that it's a mercy to think my offspring was not so thick-headed."

"I don't understand you," stammered the banker. "You have refused to forgive your son for running counter to your wishes for years. You seem to expect me to pardon my daughter out of hand."

"My dear old friend," said Sir John. "It comes ill from me, I grant you, but I am here pledged to plead Grace's cause. Whatever the reason of my quarrel with Charlie, suffice it to say it is now removed; and if his marriage had but your sanction, it would please me more than any alliance he could have made."

This was flattering, very. Mr. Holbourne tingled down to his very finger-tips with gratification. Recognised by Sir John, he felt that Gracie's marriage would be perfectly satisfactory. Still had he not been steeling himself these last few weeks to emulate his pet model, hardening his heart, stifling his affections, and when at length fondly hoping he had attained to the stern unrelenting frame of mind which he so revered in the Baronet, lo and behold that gentleman abdicates the position which he has held for years, and comes talking to him about the advisability of forgiving these wayward children of theirs! It had been a severe struggle ere the good-natured banker could quite make up his mind that his dignity required him to discard his children. But he would not be behind his neighbour, and he also would preach a lesson to the irreverent youth of this generation, that parents were not to be lightly dealt with. He has arrived at this stage, recollect, only after much petrification of his natural feelings, a process which has been accomplished with more sighs and

regrets than the banker would care to look back upon.

Like that ancient gentleman of monkish legend, he has attained the top of his pillar, and is prepared to look down upon human joys and affections with disdainful melancholy for the future. It accords ill with his genial character. What matter? Have we never seen men make themselves miserable in the gratification of their pride before now? What tortures will our sisters not undergo in indulgence of their vanity! If you wish really to preach a homily on that subject, I commend you to a fine Ascot Cup day, which bursts into stormy tears about lunch time. A sad sight is woman in draggled drapery—sadder reflection still, she is painfully aware of it, and the honeyed contralto of the morning turns to the ascidulated treble in the afternoon. Though you have abandoned your umbrella to her, speculate not on her gratitude. A week hence she may thank you. At present all she knows is that her petticoats are bemired, her hair out of curl, that she is looking her worst, and that you are looking at her.

The banker hesitated some time before he replied; when his answer came, it was in a constrained voice, very different from his usual jubilant, self-satisfied tones. The gold eye-glass with which he used to point his speeches, dangled neglected on his waistcoat.

"Grace, like Reginald," he said, harshly, "has made her own election. When children choose to set their fathers at defiance, to treat their express commands as subject of ridicule, they can hardly be surprised should the father on his side forget that they are his offspring. Sir John, you moot this request to an old man, sore-stricken by the conduct of those to whom he has given life. I loved my children dearly; they have laughed at me. You! you!" he said, "have taught us the way to deal with such untoward stock. I take my lesson from yourself, and say that Grace and Reginald are no longer children of mine."

"My dear old friend," replied the Baronet sadly, "I also said that in my wrath, and with far better grounds for doing so than you have. If I tell you that I have

lived to think myself wrong, won't that induce you to reconsider your sentence?"

The banker only wanted in reality a decent pretext to retire from the unnatural (to him) position he had assumed.

"Of course," he said slowly, "it does make a difference, if you choose to make it up with Charlie."

"My dear Holbourne!" exclaimed the Baronet, "I am not yet reconciled with Charlie, but I have fair grounds for supposing that our original quarrel was due in some measure to a misconception on my part. Will you pardon your daughter if I make peace with my son?"

The banker paused, and played after his manner with his eye-glass.

"You must admit, Sir John," he said at length, "that you are departing rather from the example you have held up to us;" and as he spoke he eyed his companion anxiously, as if fearful he would take him at his word.

"Have I not told you," replied the Baronet, earnestly, "that, stern and unforgiving as I am by nature, I have come at last to think that I have meted out hard judgment to that son of mine? When you see me, after all these years, telling you that I wish I had dealt otherwise with him—when I consent to swallow my pride, and own confidentially to you that I fear I have been but an obstinate, uncharitable old fool after all, will you, then, say no to my request? You can't, you won't, I know you too well, Holbourne. Gracie appeals to me as her godfather and father-in-law. I have promised to stand by her and make peace between you. Promise me before I go that you will write and say you forgive her."

"If you can forgive Charlie, Sir John, I cannot refuse to pardon Grace. Is it a bargain?" And the banker's face lit up the idea of once more seeing his bonnie Grace again.

"Clinched, signed, and sealed!" cried the Baronet, in jubilant tones, as he clasped his friend's hand. "My pardon, unconditional, except that they come here shortly, goes by to-day's post. Let yours also."

"It shall," replied Mr. Holbourne blithely; and with another warm shake of the hands the queerly-matched friends parted.



CHAPTER XLII.

MARION IN TROUBLE.

MARION LANGWORTHY was speedily made aware of her uncle's decision regarding Grace. She had been, of course, cognizant of the conference between him and Sir John, and led up to the subject thereof in her usual subtle manner after dinner. The banker would have been sore put to it had he wished to evade his niece's insidious cross-examination; but he had no such intention, and at once explained to her the object of Sir John's visit, and the resolution he had come to. Marion, as we know, had decided to throw no obstacles in the way of his reconciliation with his daughter, and Mr. Holbourne was, to say the truth, somewhat relieved to find it met with her entire approval. Though he would have scorned to own such a thing, yet the banker stood in unmistakeable awe of his niece's opinion, and feared it not a whit the less because, as a rule, it was somewhat difficult to arrive at in the first instance. But Miss Langworthy, if somewhat chary of expressing her views to start with, always took care they should be clearly comprehended in the sequel, and in her own way was at considerable pains to prove the correctness of her apprehension. Her uncle had arrived at a dim understanding of this fact, and was therefore pleased to find that his intentions with regard to Grace found favour in her sight.

"I don't see how you could hold out uncle. It was very foolish, and I suppose I should say wrong, of Gracie to run away. It was, at all events, behaving very badly to you; but it is done now, and you know you love her dearly, so there is nothing left but to make the best of it. Besides, if Sir John acknowledges Charlie again he must do something to help them; it's a connection you like, and I don't see why it should not all do very well. Charlie's being so completely discarded by his father was the great objection to it—and that removed, I don't think there's much to find fault with when you have once forgiven Gracie for her mutiny."

"Just what I felt, Marion. I can't quarrel with my daughter all my life. If Sir John can forgive I can," continued the banker, eagerly. "The minx had no business to run away and set me at defiance, but if he had but been on terms with his father I should never have opposed her marriage with Charlie Collingham. Now that's all settled, and I have written to tell them to come here."

But Miss Langworthy had several causes of mental disquietude, and it was one of these that had made her so inquisitive about the object of Sir John's visit. She knew that Lettice was at Churton, and though not exactly seeing how, felt that there was considerable danger of a meeting between her and Reginald. If they once exchanged explanations, Marion knew that she must stand convicted of most unblushing falsehood at the least—how much further she might be compromised she could hardly say. It was consequently a relief to her mind to find out that Sir John's visit bore no reference to Miss Cheslett (such she still was to Marion) and her affairs. She was in happy ignorance that Reginald was at that moment at Churton, that all had been cleared up between him and his betrothed, and that her own conduct was laid bare in all its mendacity and vindictiveness.

Miss Langworthy, too, had received an intimation of danger from another quarter. Sixty days soon glide away, and since Marion had so rashly affixed her sig-

nature at Mr. Lightfoot's suggestion, that mystic period has elapsed. She has received an official intimation from Messrs. Hartz and Smelter, that two of her notes of hand will fall due at the end of the week, requesting her to provide for the taking up of the same. She wrote by return of post to Mr. Lightfoot, but that gentleman curtly recommended her to meet her liabilities promptly, as the Israelite who was in possession of the documents alluded to was a veritable descendant of Shylock, notorious for his rapacity, and capable even of attaching her person if his lust for gold was not satiated. Marion, though somewhat uneasy in her mind, was by no means so impressed with this intelligence as her correspondent anticipated. She had a hazy idea that a woman was not liable to arrest for debt, and looked upon Lightfoot's letter as intended to frighten her only. She thought she would have to pay "these things," so she termed them, some day; but had no conception that any arbitrary steps could be taken against her in reference to them. Had Marion more thoroughly comprehended her liabilities, she would probably have at once made a clean breast of it to her uncle, but she did not. There would be much awkwardness in explaining how it was that she had got into the hands of these bill-discounters--for what she had wanted all this money; and though Miss Langworthy's fertile imagination would doubtless have proved equal to the occasion, and devised some plausible story to satisfactorily account for such transactions, yet she quite failed to recognise the imminent danger she stood in. Of course if these people did proceed to extremities, exposure was certain, and explanation would be difficult in the extreme; but Marion looked upon her quondam adviser's letter as simply an attempt at further extortion, and resolved to disregard it.

Miss Langworthy, in neat hat and comfortable seal-skin jacket, issues from her uncle's door this crisp November morning, with no immediate misgivings concerning her liabilities, intending to make a few visits in Aldringham. She takes little heed of a flashily-dressed man, with bright scarlet necktie, who is idly sucking his stick on the opposite side of the way. But that ill-

attired individual regards her with considerable attention, and lounges in her footsteps with an indolent, slouching gait, as one accustomed to dog the perambulations of his fellows. This man, unfortunately for Marion, is a very epicure in his profession. Cynical and discontented with the calling to which the fates have doomed him, he solaces himself by conducting it in the most sensational manner possible. His vocation is to serve writs, but, unless tied tightly down by the instructions of his employers, Mr. Trapster can never resist waiting for the opportunity of a great scenic effect. He has no idea of a quiet arrest; his monomania is to explode his torpedo when it will create the greatest sensation.

This singular fancy has cost him several sad mishaps. He has been hurled from the top of a drag at Goodwood—precipitated from a window at Long's—kicked down innumerable stairs—stricken to the ground at the steps of St. George's, Hanover Square, for exercising his functions at the conclusion of the marriage ceremony. But nothing can wean him from his hobby.

"A writ served at the right moment is better than any play," he was wont to observe to his intimates. "It's a leetle dangerous, I grant you, but so's practical joking. In my case, I always get paid if I am damaged—practical jokers don't. I makes the most fun I can out of the business, and takes the chances."

Mr. Trapster knew very well that the most business-like course to have taken would have been to call upon Mr. Holbourne and show him the writ issued against his niece. He was quite aware that the probabilities would be in favour of its being settled then out of hand, but, Mr. Trapster argued, there would be no fun attached to that form of procedure. To Mr. Trapster's eccentric conception of humour, a far more public mode of action was preferable, and it was with a silent chuckle that he now followed in the steps of his unconscious victim.

If ever there was a woman to whom a public exposure was likely to prove unbearable, it was Marion. Her wrath had been very great, as we know, on the discovery that she had been made a fool of in Robert Collingham's case—although not intentionally on his part. Yet it had

taken her some time to forgive Grace for her innocent share in that disappointment. As for the male delinquent, it was well for him that he had never required mercy at Marion's hands—that he was placed out of reach of her vengeance. No woman would have been more relentless in reprisal than Miss Langworthy, had opportunity been vouchsafed her. The sorest trial to her in that affair had been the condolence of some of her Aldringham friends, who vowed they had been looking forward to congratulate her on the engagement.

Marion, quite unconscious of her eccentric follower, threads her way through the town towards Mrs. Methringham's house. That lady, it may be remembered, is one of Miss Langworthy's most intimate friends. But ere she reaches it, she finds herself in the midst of a bevy of acquaintances, of whom Mrs. Kennedy forms one, and is immediately involved in hand-shaking, and conversation.

To Mr. Trapster, with his peculiar ideas of humour, this seems a most suitable occasion on which to present that ominous strip of paper which he bears with him. Leisurely selecting it from a capacious pocket-book, while his eyes twinkle with glee, he suddenly thrusts himself into the group of ladies, and doffing the white hat to Marion, observes,

"Miss Langworthy, I believe."

"Well!" exclaims Marion, drawing herself up to her full height, and confronting the intruder with extreme disdain, "what do you want?"

"Nothing much, Miss," replied the bailiff, with a grin, "but I've a little bit of paper here for you. Suit of Hartz and Smelter, £267 10s., with costs. What shall we do about it?"

"What do you mean, man?" gasped Mrs. Kennedy, breathlessly, as the group scattered like pigeons before the hawk; while Marion, with colourless cheek and clasped hands, gazed vacantly at her persecutor.

"Simply I arrest this young lady for debt, and if she or her friends can't settle it, I shall have to do my dooty, and convey her to Drollington gaol, that's all. But what's two hundred and sixty-seven odd to the likes of

her? Don't you be frightened, miss. It's only walking home to your friends for the money. You'll have to excuse my accompanying you, but business is business, and I'm bound not to lose sight of a prisoner."

"You are talking nonsense, fellow," retorts Mrs. Kennedy. "If you annoy us further we shall have to give you over to the police." But as she glances at Marion's colourless cheeks, she feels there is very little nonsense about the transaction.

This last idea tickles Mr. Trapster amazingly; he bursts into an unseemly guffaw, through the lulls of which come half stifled ejaculations of "Give me over to the police! Lor, here's a start! Give me over to the police! Well, I'm blessed if this ain't a go!"

By this time Marion has recovered her presence of mind.

"An unpleasant mistake, Mrs. Kennedy, she exclaims, with a somewhat forced smile. "I never did profess to understand how I was left with regard to my poor father's liabilities, or how I am situated with regard to my own little property. I think I had best go home and see my uncle at once."

This again seemed to amuse the cynical Trapster.

"There ain't nothing else to be done, miss. We never takes ladies like you to Drollington, though, of course, that's what it comes to in extremities. But we'd best jog home and see about it. My time, begging your pardon, is valooable."

Marion wished her friends good-bye—such, indeed, as had courage to see the *dénouement*—and then, with downcast eyes and cheeks aflame, hurried home with her equivocal follower at her heels.

On her arrival at her own door, Marion was doomed to still further torture. Mr. Trapster, to her dismay, utterly declined to wait outside, but persisted in accompanying her into the house, to the complete confusion of the butler, who could scarcely credit his ears when told by his mistress to let "that man" follow her into the drawing-room. There Mr. Trapster proved equally impracticable. When Miss Langworthy requested him to take a seat while she went to find her uncle, that

imperturbable personage said he would accompany her on her mission. It was in vain Marion urged she would be back directly. "Can't let you out of my sight, Miss, I'm sorry to say till the thing's settled. It's against all rules. I'd do anything to oblige a lady, but I'm responsible for your safe keeping now. Of course I know you wouldn't, but then it is possible you might look for your uncle at the railway station, and take a train somewhere if you were disappointed about finding him. It's the worst of our profession, miss—it makes us distrust our fellow-creatures.

There was nothing to be done but to send for Mr. Holbourne, and this Miss Langworthy accordingly did. By this the household were all agog, and no one more conscious of that fact than Marion, as she sat quivering with shame and impotent wrath in the drawing-room; while opposite her, on the extreme edge of his chair, was perched the monster of the flame-coloured neckerchief, his white hat deposited carefully at his feet, beguiling the time by sucking the top of his stick, and glancing admiringly at his victim.

Bitter were Marion's reflections at this time. No one could guess more accurately than she how far the news of her misadventure had spread in Aldringham. The thing had been so public that, as Miss Langworthy well knew, the story of her being arrested for debt would be fully discussed at every tea-table in the town that night. She had guided the scandal of the place for some time past, now she was called upon to breast it; and Marion felt that was beyond her. She pictured to herself the different versions that would be given of her *contretemps*. She saw her dear friends each publishing her own particular edition of the follies and vanities that had led to such a disgraceful catastrophe. Her ears tingled as she thought how unanimous they would be upon the one point, to wit, "that they always had suspected there was something not quite right about Miss Langworthy." And then Marion thought what scope there was for their lively tongues when they came to consider how it was that she had incurred her liabilities. "Opium-eating," "drawing-room alcoholism," "gambling" on the turf,

on the stock-exchange, would be the least of the charges brought against her.

One thing alone seemed clear to Marion—that she must leave Aldringham at once. She had queened it there too long not to have made enemies, and she scorned to become a cipher in the little world she had so long ruled. She must go away she hardly knew where, but she could face Aldringham society no more, for some time at all events.

It was curious and typical of the girl's character that what would have weighed upon most people's minds in her situation scarcely cost her a thought. To the generality of nephews or nieces so placed, the serious part of the affair would have been the having to appeal to an uncle for a considerable sum of money without being able to give any explanation of how such a debt had been incurred. Marion troubled herself not an iota upon this point. She felt quite certain her uncle would pay it for her. She had equally made up her mind to decline any explanation concerning her involvements.

At this juncture the banker hurriedly entered the room.

"What is the matter Marion?—something gone much amiss, so Saunders seems to think. Why, who the devil are you?" he exclaimed, as his eye fell upon Mr. Trapster.

"Sheriff's officer in charge," briefly responded that functionary.

"What does he mean?" cried Mr. Holbourne, in blankest astonishment.

"My dear uncle," replied Marion, in her softest tones, "I am arrested for debt, and unless you pay that man what he demands, he tells me I must go to Drollington Gaol."

"Goodness gracious! But how do you come to owe this money? How much is it? Whom is it owing to?"

"Two hundred and sixty seven, ten—that's wot it is. Who is it owing to?—Hartz and Smelter," interposed Mr. Trapster. "As for how she comes to owe it, the lady must explain, if she can; there's a good many would

be puzzled to cipher out how it is they owes what Hartz and Smelter wants of 'em. It ain't everyone as is acquainted with the beauties of compound interest." And having favoured the banker with this information, Mr. Trapster blew his nose, and then smiled affably on his auditors.

"Marion," said the banker, "this must be a thorough case of extortion. How can you owe all this money? Tell me all about it, and I daresay I can knock off one-half of the amount.

"I will tell you nothing!" retorted Miss Langworthy, quietly but firmly. "That I am being grossly plundered I know; but sooner than expose my folly, I will go to Drollington Gaol. If you love me, pay that man what he demands, and question me no more. I am disgraced for ever in Aldringham; the further ignominy would be of no great matter, after all."

In vain did the banker urge upon his niece that, if she would but give him some clue to her transactions with Hartz and Smelter, he could probably knock something considerable off their account. Marion was resolute; she would explain nothing—if her uncle chose to pay that sum for her, she should be very grateful; if not, it would be less painful to her to go to Drollington than face the public exposure of her folly which the contesting of Hartz and Smelter's claim would call forth.

Mr. Holbourne could not see his niece go to prison, and wound up by signing a cheque for the amount, upon receipt of which Mr. Trapster took his departure, extremely pleased with the way he had managed his little affair, and speculating a good deal upon "what larks that young woman had been up to."

That evening Miss Langworthy informed her uncle that she must leave Aldringham, at all events for the present. It was useless to argue with her. She said frankly that she would not face the Aldringham world while the scandal of that public arrest was still fresh in their mouths, and the banker felt that he could not gain-say her. So it was settled that the next morning she should go and stay for a while with some relations of hers—quiet, hum-drum people, at whose proffered hospitality the fair Marion had hitherto rather turned her nose up.



CHAPTER XLIII.

CONCLUSION.

LETTICE'S advance towards recovery was slow her extreme nervousness still painful to witness. If Reginald was long absent from her, the old dread of Marion's interposition once more beset her; and the doctor pronounced that her lover's presence was essential to her complete restoration to health. Sir John himself was a constant visitor to the invalid's room, and her gentle manner won upon his rugged nature strangely. As for Sylla, she was wrapped up in her patient. Most of us take a warm interest in those it may have been our fate to befriend. We all feel a strong sympathy for the waif we have saved from being engulfed in life's stormy waters. Much more must this hold good concerning the being for whose existence we have wrestled so long and wearily with death. I can hardly fancy a physician not feeling concern in the ultimate career of the man whom his skill has for the time rescued from the tomb.

Great was the astonishment of the Baronet and his daughter when one morning Reginald unfolded to them Lettice's history, and told Sir John that she was the sister of his son's first wife.

"I have Charlie's sanction to tell you all this," he continued: "indeed more—he wished you to be acquainted with it. You were much mistaken, Sir John, concerning

the character of that first wife of his. I never saw her, of course, but know her to have been as pure and innocent as my own sweet Lettice. An unhappy confusion of names led you to believe that he had married very differently. He, in his foolishness, was too proud to correct your mistake; but I trust, for Gracie's sake, you will forgive him now."

"He is about to bring his bride to Aldringham," replied the Baronet drily. "Let him come here afterwards and tell me his own story. I don't think he will find me hard to satisfy. Your own case, Master Regi, is more difficult. What do you mean to say to your father, sir, about your own contumacious behaviour?"

"Nothing," replied the young man quietly. "I shall leave you and Sylla to say what sort of a bride it is that I have won. Let Gracie, if she can, convince him of Marion's real character, but I doubt her succeeding. As for me, I shall manage to take care of my little wife in some way, as soon as she is well enough to be made such."

"Then Lettice is my sister, after all!" exclaimed Sylla.

"Yes, in some measure, if you choose to acknowledge her as such," replied Reginald, laughing.

"If I choose!" exclaimed Miss Collingham. "Why, you know I think her the dearest girl that ever lived."

"An opinion in which I thoroughly coincide," said Holbourne: "and I don't even except Gracie, though you ought."

"Well, yes, I can't give up Gracie," returned Sylla, smiling. "But I think I can do with two such sisters."

"What do you say, Sir John?" inquired Reginald, somewhat nervously.

The Baronet's face grew dark.

"Charlie has not treated me well," he said at length. "It was not lightly that I quarrelled with him. He had no right to leave me all these years under such a misconception. I can't say I should have approved or liked his first marriage, even as it was. But it was very different from what I deemed it. Had he told me his story, and brought home such a daughter-in-law as Lettice Melton,

there would have been no feud between us. I am quite willing, Reginald, to acknowledge the connection; and though in a worldly point of view it's a bad match for you, I think you a deuced lucky fellow, all the same."

Reginald Holbourne's face flushed with mingled pride and pleasure at the Baronet's speech. "Thank you, Sir John," he said, earnestly. "I can't say more, but I mean a good deal when I say thank you for your kindness to Lettice."

Very lonely felt the banker in his now solitary home. When you have been habituated for years to the softening presence of woman in your wigwam, her absence presses hardly upon your material comforts, to say nothing of the sense of desolation that also attends such a gap in your household. The loss of that imperceptible influence which an educated woman throws around her hearth is a sore blow to the man left to bear it single-handed. The closed piano, the disappearance of the tumbled music, of the work-boxes, of the endless embroidery, lace-work, and other womanly litter, at all of which you have inveighed in your day, come home to you now. How you wish they were but back again! Little complaint would you make if the Grand Duchess valses were rehearsed for the fifth time; if your india-rubber had been misappropriated, your pencils confiscated, and you found the *Times* cut up into patterns before you had looked at it. Yet how angry these things made you once! But that time has passed away, and as you sip your wine alone, you look back regretfully, and wish those days could come again.

No man was more calculated to feel all this than Mr. Holbourne, and the advent of Grace and her husband really came like a flood of sunlight upon his existence. Relieved from Marion's malign influence, Grace speedily won her way back to her father's heart. The old house seemed alive again as she tripped about it; while her husband showed a deference to his father-in-law, and oblivion of his gout, which speedily reinstated him in the latter's good opinion.

"Father," said Grace one morning, as they two sat

over the drawing-room fire, "I want to talk to you about Reginald."

The banker gave a slight start.

"Better not, child—he has behaved infamously to poor Marion, and is going to marry——"

"My husband's sister-in-law," interrupted Mrs. Collingham. "I don't know much about her, but believe her to be as sweet a girl as a man is likely to meet with. Charlie has gone over to Churton to see her now. She has been dreadfully ill, you must know. She came down as companion to Sylla, and has been near dying, but she is coming round now. Reginald is staying at Sir John's to nurse her through her convalescence. Fancy Regi as a nurse! I am longing to see him in that capacity!"

"Reginald at Churton!" exclaimed the banker. "Do you mean to tell me that Collingham is backing up that boy in his mad fancy?"

"Listen, father," replied Grace, "for this is my mission. Reginald will marry no one else but Lettice Melton. She is a sister of Charlie's first wife, and they have grown so fond of her at Churton, that Sir John is quite willing to recognise the connection. Don't believe in Marion's tribulations. If Robert had asked her, instead of me, she would have been Mrs. Collingham this minute. Reginald was engaged to her as a boy, and she kept him on as a *pis-aller*, with no intention of holding to her troth, if she could do better."

But Mr. Holbourne was hardly prepared to throw aside his faith in his niece so soon. True it was that Marion's last escapade in the matter of the arrest had somewhat shaken his belief in that young lady, but he had so accustomed himself to rest upon her judgment that he could not as yet admit that he had been deceived in her. Grace showed rare tact in the management of her case. She alleged nothing against her cousin, beyond that she had ceased to care about Reginald for some time past, and that therefore she was by no means so badly treated as the banker deemed her.

"At all events, father," she urged, at last, "do not discard him until you have seen this daughter he would give you. Sir John would be the last man to approve of

her, unless she was really a girl that you might welcome as such. Will you be guided by him in this matter? He won my pardon, let him also plead for Reginald. You have forgiven me—don't be hard upon Regi."

It was not to be supposed that Mr. Holbourne would yield all at once, and Grace, quite satisfied with the impression she had made, very prudently refrained from pushing the question further. She was quite content when her father replied, "He could say nothing at present—he must think it over, talk to Sir John about it, and see this Miss Melton for himself." Mrs. Collingham felt that her brother's case was gained, and that Reginald's reconciliation with his father was a mere question of time.

The banker began to expand again under the sunshine of his daughter's presence, and Miss Langworthy day by day became less of a necessity in the routine of his life. He went over to Churton, and had a long interview with Sir John, which resulted in his introduction to Lettice, and his sanction to Reginald's marriage. Finally, it was arranged that the latter should take his place in the bank, and Mr. Holbourne strongly urged that the young couple should come and keep house with him, but to this Reginald put forth strong objections. He said nothing about the treatment that Lettice had experienced at Marion's hands, but confined himself to pointing out that his own previous relations with his cousin would make residence under the same roof extremely awkward for both of them at present, and his father could but acquiesce in that view of the subject.

This difficulty was, however, solved by Miss Langworthy herself. That young lady, upon hearing of the banker's reconciliation with his children, and that Reginald and Lettice were both staying at Churton, was of course aware her nefarious manœuvres must now be thoroughly exposed to her cousins. Whether they chose to make use of such knowledge or not, it was quite clear to Marion that she could never face them again. She knew that they must be aware of most of her mendacious statements, that the meeting of Reginald and Lettice must have resulted in a full explanation concerning her visit to Baker Street, and that she felt neither of

them could forgive. She retired gracefully and dexterously from the scene. She wrote to her uncle to say that she forgave Reginald, and wished him and his bride health and happiness; that for herself she could not think of returning to Aldringham, at all events for a long time, after the humiliation to which she had been lately subjected, and ask his permission to make her home with the relatives with whom she was now staying.

When more business heads than Lettice's came to tumble over the late Mr. Cheslett's papers, it turned out that he had left some five or six thousand pounds behind him, all of which devolved upon his granddaughter, so that Reginald's bride came to him not altogether empty-handed after all.

Miss Meggott, when she was informed by Donaldson of Charlie's intended marriage, was thrown into a mixed state of gratification and despondency. She felt all the interest that is natural to woman at the idea of a genuine love affair being brought to a satisfactory conclusion; but mingled with it was the feeling that a favourite lodger would from that time be lost to her.

I wish him well, Mr. Donaldson," she said. "Nobody's congratulations will be more sincere than mine, but I can't help feeling sad about it too. The complaint is dreadfully catching, and you will be following his example shortly, and then what's to become of Polly Meggott? When I haven't you two to blow me up or to laugh with, I shall get moped. Of course we shall get other lodgers, but none that will suit me as well, I know. I only hope, Mr. Donaldson, that you and Mr. Collingham have been as well satisfied with Polly Meggott as she has been with you. I'm sure," continued Polly gravely, "that if I chaff too much, it's been your fault. The pair of you taught me, and led me into it."

"Never mind," replied Donaldson, laughing, "I give you absolution for all your impertinences—past, present, and to come. You will have only me to take care of in future, Polly, so I shall expect to be kept quite in silver paper."

"Gracious! yes," replied Miss Meggott, with a quiver of her left eye, "I shall have to be careful of you. I shan't let you go out except with goloshes and a

comforter. When one comes to one's last adorer, one must watch over him in earnest. You had better be on your guard, Mr. Donaldson," continued Polly, raising her forefinger impressively; "if I catch you sneezing, I shall order you to bed;" and with the tremor of her left eye resolving into a palpable wink, Miss Meggott slipped out of the room.

Mr. Lightfoot's last venture was the opening of what he called the Alliance Ginger Beer Emporium, which distributed that wholesome drink in gaudily labelled bottles, with teetotal ballads on the reverse side. Despite the exorbitant price charged—and Mr. Lightfoot's nectar was a penny dearer than any other vendor's—yet there was no denying that the Emporium was doing a wonderful business. Mr. Bullock could not comprehend it; he went the length of procuring a bottle, and bore witness to the fact that it was better than any ginger beer he had ever tasted. "What is it he puts in it?" mused Mr. Bullock; "it's something more than ginger-beer. It picks one up more than any ginger-beer I ever drank."

Your great inventors are ever beset by envious rivals. It was one of these latter whose trade had suffered in consequence of the great success of the Alliance article, that at last conceived the malignant idea of analysing the sparkling wine of the Emporium. It was becoming more popular day by day, and the ordinary vendors of the drink found their stock left upon their hands. This man consulted Mr. Bullock; they procured a bottle, and submitted it to a chemist of repute; and when Mr. Bullock received that gentleman's report, he smote his thigh, gave vent to a prolonged whistle, and exclaimed "I think, my friend Lightfoot, I've got you at last!"

The Emporium, I regret to say, was almost immediately broken up. The Excise prosecuted Mr. Lightfoot for selling spirits without a license, and proved incontestably that the popularity of the Alliance Ginger Beer was due to its being cleverly dashed with gin.

THE END.



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